

# African Literature in the Digital Age: Class and Sexual Politics in New Writing From Nigeria and Kenya

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Using wide-ranging literature and theoretical concepts published digitally and in print, this thesis will build the emerging picture of African literature in English that is being published in the digital space. The study will analyse the technological production of classed and sexualised bodies in new African writing in cyberspace by some of the young writers from Nigeria and Kenya, as well as writing from a few of their contemporaries from other African countries. This thesis will also analyse the differences between the agenda of the previous generation – including representation and perspectives - and that of a new generation in cyberspace. In the process, I hope to show how literature in cyberspace is asking questions as much of psychic landscapes as of the material world.

To my knowledge, there is no substantive literary study done so far that contextualizes this digital experience.

Dedicated to Laura Smith, Adefela Adenekan and to the memory of my late father Thomas Oladipupo Akanni Adenekan.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: The African Writer and the Changing Nature of The Text in a Digital Age.....	1
Theorising Class Consciousness.....	2
Theorising Sexuality.....	7
The Idea of Space and the Internetting of literature.....	9
The Book Versus Cyberspace.....	13
Online Publishing and the Economy of Visibility.....	19
The Idea of the ‘Private’ as Used in this Thesis.....	24
The Concept of Generations of Modern African Writers.....	27
The Writer as Reporter.....	31
Methodology.....	34
 Chapter One: African Poetry in a Digital Age.....	41
Cybertext and the Concept of Class.....	43
The Audience and Cybertext.....	53
Politics and Online Poetry.....	60
Transnationalism and the idea of Home.....	70
 Chapter Two: Class and the Online Writing Space.....	75
Cyberspace as a Marker of Social Status in Contemporary Africa.....	77
Online Fictional Characters as Embodying Real Life Class Struggle.....	88
 Chapter Three: From Wole Soyinka to Shailja Patel: Queer Sexual Politics in a New Media Age .....	104
The African Queer as Anti-Capitalist Cyborg.....	123
 Chapter Four: The Queer Body, the Digital Space and the Agenda of Late Capitalism.....	138
Diasporic Queers in Online Literature.....	155
Morality in the Closet.....	161
 Chapter Five: From the Print to the Web: Modernity and the Libidinal Modern Girl.....	167
The Emergence of the Libidinal Modern Girl.....	177
African Women’s Bodies as Outhouses for Men.....	183
The Modern Woman’s Quest for Love.....	188

Chapter Six:	Representations of the Libidinal Economy in a New Media Age.....	197
	Euro-modernity and the History of Literary Representation of the Libidinal.....	200
	The Nature of Sex Work in the Twenty-First Century.....	209
	The Prostitute as a Tormented Figure.....	213
Chapter Seven:	Class and the New Sex Worker.....	227
	Sex and the Mobile Phone.....	241
	New Sex Workers.....	245
Conclusion.....		253
Bibliographical References.....		265



# INTRODUCTION TO THESIS

## THE AFRICAN WRITER AS REPORTER AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF TEXT IN A DIGITAL AGE

In *The Anthropology of Texts, Persons and Publics*, Karin Barber (2007: 40) makes a case for the study of all genres. Borrowing from Franco Moretti, she argues that the traditional obsession with "canonical texts has blocked our view of the real historical processes at work in the emergence and spread of literary forms." Barber succinctly articulates why all literary forms deserve our attention, including those that failed, those that were once successful but have now faded away, and those that are just emerging. When doing this, she asks us to pay special attention to devices and genres.

This thesis represents a critical exploration of class and sexual politics in the creative writing of a new generation of Kenyan and Nigerian writers in a digital age. Its goal is to present a new generation of modern African writers as people engrossed in using literature in cyberspace to reimagine and reframe class and sexual identities, in their position as cultural ambassadors. Through a comparative analysis of the agenda of creative work in the book age – and to a smaller extent in the pre-colonial era - with the way a new generation of African writers is using the digital space to project itself, the postcolonial state and Africa in the twenty-first century - this thesis is taking the position that the African artist is an agenda setter, who is often interested in framing and determining his society's cultural values. This research will also be shedding new lights on how regular real-time interactions between writers and their readers online, are shaping the discourse of personal and collective identities, especially the issues of sexuality and social formation. We can link this to what Kolade Odutola (2012:18) aptly called "Cyber-framing", and this is because cyberspace

enables digitally-wired Africans the chance to shape and re-frame the way they and their societies are seen and perceived. Also, a concept of the potential to impact self-realization in cyberspace can be parlayed to fictional narratives and poetry, especially in fictional characters implicit or stated position as embodiment of a social class and as belonging to a particular sexual orientation. Werner Severin and James Tankard (2000: 219) see this as the “agenda-function of the media,” since cyberspace is an intrinsic part of the media. Here, this study sees African writers in the new media space as agenda-setters within and outside of literature. This investigation will therefore provide essential academic insight into the thinking and worldview of members of a new generation of African writers. To my knowledge, no substantive literary study has been done so far that contextualizes these experiences.

### **Theorizing Class Consciousness**

Since time immemorial, African artists have consistently held the responsibility of shaping and imagining identities. Cultural values have also likewise been inscribed on sculptures, masks, songs, dances, oral poetry and written texts. With regards to this new millennium, what we are witnessing online should be seen as a continuation of these cultural responsibilities of the African artist. The first two chapters of this thesis illustrate how the artist represents class consciousness and struggle. Given his sophistication, the artist in Africa often occupies a certain professional position – somewhere in the middle, between the ruling houses and the ruled. In her study of Rwandan ethnography, Barber (2007:65) remarks that in some pre-colonial societies, there was class discrimination due to some oral texts being associated “with a particular social stratum.” Barber’s observation is poignant but in addition we should point out that with the advent of colonialism in the late nineteenth century, the colonial modernity project introduced a new version of social classification based on a western model, one in which race played a vital role. The modernity project being referred

to here is the civilising project embarked upon by colonial administrators and European missionaries who believed that Europe's idea of modernity should be applied by all means in the non-West. This new idea of a class system was articulated by Adam Smith, one of the leading architects of class theory as far back as the seventeenth century. Referring to the people of occupied Ireland, whom many within the English ruling classes saw at the time as inferior, he said in his seminal work *The Wealth of Nations*: "The public can impose upon almost the whole body of people the necessity of acquiring those most essential parts of education," because, "an ignorant and stupid" class of people threatens society with "the most dreadful disorders". (see Mary Poovey, 1994: 44).

Smith saw the Irish and the poor in England as ignorant and as a drain on the nation, and that the only way of making these people productive was through education. The colonial project introduced a similar belief in the way it saw Africans. Fictional representations of Africans such as that of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1973) portrayed Africans as ignorant and as a drain on the West. These narratives articulated the idea that only through western education could Africans become civilised.

On another side of the class debate was Karl Marx. For Marx, an analysis of the social classes was the key to understanding capitalism and modes of production. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels argued that the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. (see Bert N. Adams and R.A Sydies, 2002: 133). For Marx, classes are defined and structured by who owns or possesses property as well as the means of production in addition to who performs the work in the production process.

Marx's theory on social classification is not too dissimilar from those articulated in orature of several pre-colonial African societies. Kwame Nkrumah (1970) and Shola Adenekan (2009)

argue that class struggles existed in Africa prior to colonial rule. There were the ruling classes, which comprised royalty and important chiefs, and in the middle there were merchants and farmers and on the lowest rung of the social ladder were the poor and the slaves. Chapter One of this thesis shows the way in which certain oral Yoruba texts are geared towards the ruling classes and these powerful merchants, while other texts speak to the aspiration of those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. Yoruba people also recognise the instability of class as epitomised by the saying: “Ati ri ọmọ Ọba to di ẹru ri, ati ri Iwọfa to di Ọlọla”. (Trans: “We have seen a Prince who became a slave, and we have seen a slave who rose to become very rich”). Yoruba people see the condition of social class like the condition of texts as not being permanent. Wole Soyinka’s play *Death and the King’s Horseman* (1975), loosely based on a true story, depicts some of the privileges enjoyed by the ruling classes and rich merchants, as well as how these privileges were disrupted by colonial rule.

With regard to these pre-colonial societies, Nkrumah asserts that:

“In pre-colonial Africa, under conditions of communalism, slavery and feudalism there were embryonic class cleavages. But it was not until the era of colonial conquest that an Europeanised class structure began to develop with clearly identifiable classes of proletariat and bourgeoisie. This development has always been played down by reactionary observers, most of whom maintained that African societies are homogenous and without class divisions. They have even endeavoured to retain this view in the face of glaring evidence of class struggle shown in the post-independence period, when bourgeois elements have joined openly with neo-colonialists, colonialists and imperialists in vain attempts to keep the African masses in permanent subjection.” (22).

The point Nkrumah is making here is that class differentiation and economic production are not totally by-products of the colonial modernity project. What changed, however, is that colonialism brought about the decline of the once ruling classes, who were displaced by a new band of Africans, educated by missionaries. Assigned to work with, and often responsible for controlling African kings and chiefs, these Africans reported directly to European officials. Nkrumah also sees Africa's struggle against colonialism and neo-colonialism as the main factor for this oversight of the long history of class struggle in Africa. Nkrumah is probably right, because many theorists have been fixated with seeing African literature as mainly writing back to the West.

Good examples of this theory include Manthia Diawara (1998 & 2001: 114), who reads the works of Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi wa Thiong'o as representing "the rise of national consciousness in Africa to World War II, in which Africans fought next to white people against fascism, xenophobia, and racism." But we can argue that Sembene and Ngugi use literature as a means of not only replying to Western discourse about Africa, but to also fight (their) personal class (Marxist) war against the corrupt African bourgeoisie. Both writers also place their fictional heroes in rural settings against corrupt city environments created by colonial administrators. Lewis Nkosi (1981), who is arguably the only African intellectual to actually analyse class consciousness in African literature, aptly reads fictional narratives such as Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* as two Marxist-leaning writers using fictional characters to fight the corner of the African working classes against the bourgeoisie. Although, Nkosi's analysis is germane and poignant, he devotes much of his energy to suggesting that class consciousness is a minor by-product of the colonial experience rather than something that has deeper historical roots and values.

However, one can argue that Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) is not only a depiction of the struggle between African tradition and the Euro-modernity project, but we

can also read the rise of the novel's hero Okonkwo, from a poor background to that of a wealthy and influential member of his clan as representing class mobility within a traditional African society. On the other hand, the story of his grandson Obi Okonkwo in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) represents the dynamic of class aspiration in a Euro-modernist era. Like this fictional narrative, several novels published by some members of the second generation of modern African writers, especially books published in the popular Pacesetter series of the 1980s, reflect contemporary class concerns as well as the struggle between the urban middle classes and the less fortunate who work for them. But as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie argued in the Guardian article quoted in Chapter Two of this thesis, many literary theorists simply believe that class does not exist in Africa. One can put Forde (1956) as representing this line of thinking, when he argues "Although western skills and manners appeared generally to confer or symbolise high status among urban Africans, no close parallels with western class systems should be assumed or expected." (Quoted in Oshomha Imoagene, 1989: viii).

Another reason is that some literary critics see the African middle classes as merely an extension of the West; class structure in Africa is therefore seen as largely mirroring the global exploitation of the non-West by the powerful West, through their African proxies. So some middle class African writers writing in the languages of former colonial masters are seen as buttressing the agenda of the colonial modernist project. For example, in chapters in their seminal book, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature* (1980 & 1985), Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie and Ihechukwu Madubuike, the troika of radical literary critics known as *Bolekaja* critics, attack what they see as a Eurocentric approach to African fiction. They also attack the literature produced by notable literary figures such as Christopher Okigbo, J.P Clark and Wole Soyinka as overtly Euro-centric. But while they may have good reasons for criticising Soyinka and Okigbo, they also could have argued that these writers epitomise some of the privileges enjoyed by notable artists in many pre-colonial

societies, who could have been classified as members of the elite class. Instead, these critics painted a picture of a pristine pre-colonial Africa with beautiful poetry and where there is no class struggle. The argument this study is making is that some of the hypotheses put forward by theorists have failed to take into consideration that a form of capitalist class structure existed in Africa prior to colonialism and that it is this form of capitalism that brought about the trans-Atlantic and trans-Arabian slave trades. To simply see class as one of the bad legacies of colonialism and Western capitalism is to partake in a myth that represents pre-colonial African societies as pristine and innocent.

### **Theorising Sexuality**

This study is not suggesting that African sexuality has been under-theorized. Rather, it is the representation of the sexual by several African writers that this thesis is questioning. As a matter of fact, this thesis is using various examples relating to a critical examination of sexuality in African literature. For example, the chapters in Ada Uzomaka Azodo and Maureen Ngozi Eke's (eds) *Gender and Sexuality in African Literatures and Films* (2007) provide a critical analysis of how contemporary writers and filmmakers have portrayed sex and gender practices. The authors argue that the cinema and the printed book have not accurately captured changing sexual norms and gender practices in many contemporary societies, because of the perception that Africans do not openly talk about sex. Flora Viet-Wild and Dirk Naguschewski's edited volume of essays by several literary theorists, *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literature, Volume 1* (2005), also provides a robust reading and interpretation of emerging texts on African sexuality, by focusing on the subvertiveness of this literature. Neville Hoad (2007) likewise revisits the theme of homosexuality in African literature in the light of the claim among several African politicians that homosexuality is un-African.

While these theorists primarily focused their attention on sexual politics in literature in the print format, this thesis takes the argument further by shedding ‘new’ lights on the differences and similarities in the way in which the internet generation treats the figure of the homosexual as well as the libidinal modern girl. While writers like Wole Soyinka and Ama Ata Aidoo provide one of the earliest portrayals of the figure of the homosexual, they did this by representing homosexuality as being foreign to Africa. Meanwhile, writers such as Cyprian Ekwensi and Ngugi portray prostitutes as an example of moral corruption brought about by colonisation. Like their contemporaries, these writers use sexual politics to fight a culture war between Africa and the West. The trope of the homosexual and the figure of the sex worker are therefore deployed as a means of decolonising the African body. This thesis, however, argues that some of the emerging voices see these figures as being central to our understanding of African politics, and to a history of invisibility. This is because homosexuals and prostitutes have always been part of African history, but as shadows in that history. In their attempt to subvert the political witch-hunt of Africans who are not one hundred percent straight, new writers like Shailja Patel, Unoma Azuah and Zanele Muholi are provocatively explicit. As the literary scholar Femi Osofisan (2008) observes:

“Up at least till the turn of the new millennium, you will observe, the exploration of romantic love or of sex as theme was remarkably rare in the output of our writers. Virtually no literary work dared venture, except in the deflected language of metaphor and refringent echo, into the contentious area of carnal experience. From Tutuola to Okpewho; Achebe to Iyayi; Soyinka to Sowande; Clark to Onwueme—we are talking of over four decades of writing—there is no instance of a memorable kiss... Thanks to this, the old notions of privacy, the consensual secretiveness and “holiness” that used



to be attached to such matters as love and sex have long been axed and discarded as antiquated relic. Bashfulness, decency and self-respect have become casualties in the new ethos of the so-called “free society”, where the reigning creed is to ‘tell it all’.” ([www.irnweb.org/en/journals/issues/outliers/download/.../31](http://www.irnweb.org/en/journals/issues/outliers/download/.../31)).

Older writers treat the subject of sex with reverence because they want to preserve Africa’s respectability and to counter the image of sexually-depraved Black bodies. In addition, sex is considered secondary to the task of explaining Africa to the rest of the world. So, while some members of the older generation often talk about sex in metaphors, several young writers are no longer using coded language- in their attempt to challenge the authority as well as the modern attitude towards the sexual. The explicit is truth, and truth is ethical. Cyberspace allows for this provocativeness because it is free from censorship in addition to the fact that there are now many means of publishing and disseminating creative writing in this new media age.

### **The Idea of Space and the Internetting of Literature**

Sabine Buchholz and Manfred Jahn (2005: 551) see space as having no other function "than to supply a general background against which the action takes place, something to be taken for granted rather than requiring attention". In this thesis, space is not taken for granted, rather it is interested in what Marie Laurie-Ryan (13 January 2012: <http://hup.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Space>) describes as: “The lived experience of space offers a particularly rich source of thematisation.” Additionally, the concept of space as used in this thesis focuses on the literal uses of spaces by emerging voices rather than on the metaphorical uses of the idea. Here, this study is referring to specificity of space, in which writers are located in either the physical geographical space or in the virtual space of the internet.

This concept of space can therefore be seen as linked to the idea of attachment and the argument here is that African literature clearly makes its claim on the African condition - in the real texture of its lived life and history. This notion queries what is Africa and how is it presented. What kind of language is spoken on the streets of say Lagos, Nairobi, Douala or Lilongwe, and what is the value of experience, even as it is transformed by contact with a wider world that constitutes the condition of contemporary Africa? Jenny Kennedy (2011) argues that: “Space is important in addressing the distinctions between online and offline for the contextualisation of social interactions. There is a need to identify and resolve the issue of online and offline division in the context of everyday.”

([http://swinburne.academia.edu/JennyKennedy/Papers/479042/Conceptualizing\\_Social\\_Interactions\\_in\\_Networked\\_Spaces](http://swinburne.academia.edu/JennyKennedy/Papers/479042/Conceptualizing_Social_Interactions_in_Networked_Spaces)). In this thesis, space as based on either online or physical (offline) locations is concerned with literature that speaks authentically to the African condition because the notion of space provides an avenue to express a desire for the ‘true’ self to be portrayed and it is also linked to the notion of having something in common with a community such as a shared sense of Kenyaness or a sense of being members of the professional middle classes.

This thesis also argues that relationship in cyberspace is not fully separated from nationhood as online African writers and online readers congregate on mainly African-run online communities. At the same time, non-Africans are allowed to become members of these communities as fellow digital citizens. One common factor within these online communities is that members are mostly people with the means and the skills to access the internet. So we see class manifesting and vocalising itself in the online space more than in the physical space because the writer can maintain some distance from the expectation of the geographical society and instead expresses himself or herself as a middle class African writing within a

mainly middle class internet space, without having to explain himself or his fictional characters. This virtual space also enables the writer to address in fiction and poetry, themes such as homosexuality and prostitution, which may have been considered taboo subjects in the physical space, especially by book publishers as well as by political and religious authorities. The physical space is thus seen in this thesis as being visualised by some of the emerging voices as restrictive as well as patriarchal and it is symbolised by the book, while cyberspace represents freedom and democracy. In turn, one can argue that fictional narratives reflect both the restrictions of the printed word and the freedom of online publishing.

The 'internetting' of Kenyan and Nigerian literature arguably started from the mid to late 1990s when writers seeking to draw attention to their printed work started posting poems and short stories on e-mailing lists such as Krazitivity and Ederi, and other similar listservs hosted by the likes of Yahoo and the now defunct Geocities. Some of these works also appeared on African owned websites such as Nigeria.com, Africanwriters.com, African-writing-com, Chimunrenga.com, odili.net and Nigeriavillagesquare.com. By the turn of this century, some of the established literary magazines based within and outside-Africa, not wanting to be left out of the internet race, started asking for short stories, essays and poems that can appeal to a growing online reading public. At the same time, many writers, seeking to take more control of their work started putting creative writing on personal blogs, in addition to joining online writer collectives. The advent of social media and the surge in the number of young Africans with access to mobile phones further reinforce - in the minds of several writers - the idea that the future of African literature perhaps lies online.

This assumption may not be far-fetched. In Kenya for example, Katindi Sivi Njonjo's (2010: xix) study for The Institute for Economic Affairs, suggests that young Kenyans are the majority users of the mobile phone, the computer and the internet, which she says are surpassing the mainline telephone, the print media, as well as television and radio. Pete Guest

in the leading digital technology magazine *Wired* (August 2011) points out that as of 2011, there are over 22 million Kenyans with mobile phones out of a population of 40 million. The story is even more striking in Nigeria. A 2010 survey conducted by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) suggests that close to 50 million Nigerians are online (see Victor Ahiuma-Young, 3 August 2010). In addition, recent figures from the Nigerian Communication Commission (2010) suggest that there are almost 140 million Nigerians with internet-enabled GSM mobile phones, out of a population of 150 million. The ITU report points to a dramatic growth in internet usage in Nigeria, where not only is a third of the population online, but that the country now accounts for 40% of the web traffic on the continent and that the most visited sites are the social networking terrain of Facebook, Google and Yahoo. The study also points out that there are now more mobile phones in Africa than the entire population of Europe.

Although in the online space, many young women and men are using digital tools for talking to friends, text messaging, playing video games and downloading music, the digital space is also becoming the ideal medium for knowledge and information. And not only are millions of Africans moving online, several young writers are becoming digital pioneers and activists in their own right, and in the process debunking the forecast of Africa's gloomy digital future. Young writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Lola Shoneyin have been popular at conferences on new media such as TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design).

African writers are not putting their work on cyberspace just for the sake of it; it is because communities - both local and global - are emerging from this space. And since texts tend to move to where the audience is, it is therefore no surprise that a greater amount of creative writing, mostly short stories, poetry, plays and essays are finding a home in this new media space in order to satisfy and address the demand of the digital community. In this new

millennium, space is no longer associated with the physical geography of ethnic and clan communities that has existed over many centuries because these online communities are not constrained by the identity and the artificial boundaries created by the continent's former colonial administrators. These digital entities are made up of Africans who are congregating on mobile phones to access and send text messages, as well as those accessing cyberspace through their mobile phones and the computer.

### **The Book Versus Cyberspace**

The problem with literature in Africa has never been lack of writers as Stephanie Newell (1998) argued; there have always been potential readers. The problem, however, is often with finding a publisher. From email conversations with some of these young writers, one constant worry is the problem with publishing in Nigeria and Kenya. Some of them point to the fact that even established local publishing houses often ask writers to finance the publication of their own work, and will further ask writers to sign a contract that will give the publishing house a substantial percentage of book sales. They argue that rather than submitting to exploitation they will publish their works online. These writers are probably right, as on the Nigerian writer listserv *Ederi*, an email sent by a Nigerian publisher requested a fee (the equivalent of £50 sterling) from writers whose stories were to be included in an anthology of short stories by emerging Nigerian writers.

The traditional means of publishing normally involves a writer sending off a completed manuscript to a literary agent or a publisher. The manuscript is then reviewed by an editor who decides on the suitability of the material for publication. A writer may also self-publish by taking his manuscript to a printing press, and then sell the published books himself or through booksellers, which was what many market pamphleteers did during the years of

market literature. For many young African writers, however, new media technology provides a new avenue to move literature beyond the world of book publishing, by actually publishing short stories and poems directly on blogs, social media pages and listservs.

The critic Ikheloa (10 August 2012) argues on USA-Africa Dialogue listserv:

“I read our stories nonstop on the Internet; they are more entertaining and certainly broader in range than what passes for literature in our books. So, those of you who teach these things should do what I do, go on Twitter, Facebook, online magazines and feast on delectable material. And read books too. Of course. I have said any writer writing today who doesn't have a twitter account and a Facebook page is writing in the age of Tolstoy, I might not read him or her ;-). If we were doing this on Twitter, we would have a more robust interactive conversation, the mailing list is evolving in functionality just as the book is evolving into more of an archival tool.”

What we see is that writers are not totally separated from print publication, instead the print and the online complement one another. For example, poetry posted on Facebook may be performed for members of the public in geographical locations of Lagos, London and Los Angeles, and the recording of those performances may be posted on Facebook for consumption by the online public. These works may also appear as part of a collection in a creative book project. In addition, many young African writers in the online space are very mobile with connections that extend to various parts of the globe in addition to the daily connection to the outside world that the internet enables. They interact with 'home' regularly through the internet often from anywhere across the globe. Their lives and their literature embody the phenomenon of transnationalism and postcolonial migrancy with the internet neatly obliterating the connection to geographical or temporal locations. Works posted online are modified from several physical locations. In addition these texts are posted online so as to

gauge the reaction of critics and readers alike. By this, many writers are using cyberspace as a test-bed for creative writing that may later appear in print or be published online as a concise work of literature. These processes involve-reshaping the text for different formats, and in the process the creative piece is unfixed.

Suffice it to say that creative writing and publishing online still follows similar patterns to print because many of these texts still try to mimic the material qualities of the printed page, and many online magazines still follow the linear process of publication that we have long been associated with the printed page. While what is published online may be more sexually explicit, more controversial as well as more interactive, many writers adapt materials developed offline for publication online, and materials published online such as short stories and poems are often re-formatted for publication as part of print collections. For example, Adichie's *The Thing Around Your Neck*, is a collection of short stories, most of which were written offline and then published online by online publications based in several countries. The short stories were later adapted for publication as part of a collection. The poems of Chuma Nwokolo are often first performed before a live offline audience, and then reformatted to include stunts from videos and photographs, before they are posted on YouTube with the writer reading his poems over these images. The poems are then re-worked for publication in book form.

Richard Ali (31 May 2012) points out this fluidity and multiple negotiations between the print and the online:

“The writers in my generation do a lot of talking amongst themselves. For example, I met a girl on Facebook, I liked her short stories and we got talking, she had an MS , I read the first chapters and was bowled over, so I edited for her, tried to bring out

something a bit better from the first half of her MS, she sent first chapters to a small press in America and they accepted and, while they didn't pay her an advance, they gave her a contract, published her and made her books available in print and via Amazon [she's working on making it available in Nigeria now]. I've never met the girl, still haven't. Yet, we are Facebook buddies and belong to a small Nerdz Lounge on Blackberry Messenger. A lot of the conversation the internet has fostered in this my dubbed Unapologetic Generation is within ourselves."

In Kenyan literature, Binyavanga Wainaina's rise to critical acclaim arguably started when his online autobiographical fiction *Discovering Home*

(<http://generator21.net/g21archive/africa29.html>) won the Caine Prize for African Writing.

From this, he launched an online literary magazine *Kwani*? In an interview with Rob Spillman, Wainaina recounts the role that the digital space is playing in African literature:

"You have all these young writers in Nigeria who know writers in Kenya because they met on Facebook and so-and-so's workshop. You start to get the sense of this piling up of power and production, which is now larger than the sum of any parts you can see. That certainly has meant more to writing out of the continent than any other thing. There are 19-year-olds who've read all your work and they're based in Zimbabwe." Wainaina recognises that there is still a place for the print medium, however, he asserts that: "It's gotta be digital. And that's the next thing. The moment when people will be consuming their school texts on a digital device will be a big moment for us—as a generation, our things will be read."

(<http://bombsite.com/articles/5107>).



Much of the work being requested online is arguably the natural outgrowth of the traditional writing format, but is published within the new temporal perspective of real-time format of the digital age (see also Keskinen, 2004). What Wainaina and Ali are also suggesting is that while writing in the online space still follows certain patterns similar to the book format, there is a certain degree of freedom and style, which cannot be found in book production. For example, the ways in which some of the fictional characters in the online space communicate suggest that the brevity and the informality of the new media space are impacting on the nature of the African text in a new millennium. This is because for a new generation of Africans and global readers, popular modes of communication such as Facebook posts, Twitter tweets and text messages invite more abbreviations and less rigidity in written convention. Readers' attention span can also be limited in the online space and so many writers are forced to be economical in their writing, so as to keep the attention of readers. In Chapter One, there is an analysis of how this brevity is impacting on new works, particularly on poetry.

One can, therefore, argue that the movement of texts and writers across different mediums signals an important way through which some of the emerging African voices negotiate the relationship between their works, themselves, Africa and the outside world. The highlighted fluidity and multiple negotiations between the print and online mediums represent the way in which online and offline social interactions are not set in stone, and like their texts, many of these writers move seamlessly between these platforms. One can also argue that the online and the offline worlds of African literature are interrelated and are becoming increasingly blended. The major differences, however, lie in the fact that writers think the online space offers them greater freedom for self-expression and that it brings them closer to readers and fellow writers alike, in a way that may have been impossible in the book age.

The ease with which would-be writers can publish online in addition to the recent success of some of the leading members of the new African voices such as Adichie, Wainaina and Uwem Akpan, has fuelled a renewed interest in literary careers among several educated young Africans. These developments have led to a surge in the amount of creative writing being published in the digital space. The downside of course is that with literature published on personal blogs and social network spaces, there is no effective critical standard. But Justin Reich (December 2008: 3) argues that the cheap cost of online publishing does not necessarily lead to a reduction in quality, instead it:

“leads to qualitatively different behaviour by web users...because cheaper communication allows new communication media and practices, we have a whole new set of shared cultural texts created and distributed outside of the traditional, hierarchical publication network.”

This study agrees with Reich and argues that online publishing has enriched African literature by raising issues that may not have been looked at in the print format because they were seen as taboo subjects, un-African, or deemed irrelevant to the decolonisation of African culture. Reich's view is shared by some of these young writers. The Kenyan writer Rasna Warah, in an email discussion on 4 November 2009 asserts that: “You retain control over the product, for one, and in my case, you have access to the global market, which local publishers do not provide... so I am not complaining.” (Made on Kenyan Writers listserv: n. pag).

The Nigerian writer who uses the nom-de-plume of Myne Whitman (30 November 2010) says she owes much of her success in self-publishing to the internet:

“You can understand why I will always be grateful for the vehicle the internet provides to a writer and published author like me to get my book out there. Setting up

an active blog and publishing my book has served a double purpose for me; finding out the target audience for my kind of writing and building a platform too. If not for the social networking channels, *A Heart to Mend* would never have gone viral the way it did. It was through the support of bloggers that I did my first blog tour for *A Heart to Mend* with the attendant publicity. By the end of that blog tour, I was getting requests for interviews and features almost daily. I put up chapter one of the book on a free reading website and it became a massive hit. It remained in the top 10 for three consecutive months!

The beauty of the internet was that I could remain in my work room with just my laptop and a connection, and meet up with these dozens of interviewers. As time went on, I continued networking with other writers and self-published authors and as I shared what I had learnt, I picked up some good nuggets from them too. I set up a Twitter page and opened up my Facebook profile for use with my pen name. As I became more adept at using the word-of-mouth tools on those two sites, the visibility of *A Heart to Mend* quadrupled. I learnt how to interconnect these media, how to set up scheduled tweets or how to update Facebook via RSS feeds, etc.”

(<http://sarabamag.com/featured/saraba-7/>).

### **Online Publishing and the Economy of Visibility**

With regard to self-publishing, Whitman’s statement reflects the sentiment shared by many young writers and bloggers as expressed during discussions held during the course of the research for this Thesis, on the issue of online publishing. Like Whitman, they often point out that the internet allows them to reach readers and lovers of African literature, in ways that could not have been possible in the world of book publishing. Furthermore, one can argue

that publishing online is enabling African writers to break away from the politics of postcolonial literary production which expects African writers to write in a certain way and publish books to certain markets. Unlike the more traditional mode of print publication, any person who wants to write in a public forum does not have to first pass the judgement of a publisher and journal editors. Yes, there are edited online publications owned by organised groups and companies, but there are also numerous ‘unguarded’ sites in the form of blogs and micro-blogs, where writers are making themselves heard, with many readers following what is written. While book publishers and broadcast executives influenced the decisions about what we consumed in old media forms based on what sold in the past, in the new media, online readers and viewers can select texts and digital material that cater to their individual taste. The fact that some young African writers are forming online publishing collectives such as Storymoja, Kwani, Saraba, etc, means that the old postcolonially-framed distribution and publishing networks can be by-passed by these new voices and audiences alike, and writers can therefore publish on their own terms.

Ori Schwarz

(2011: [http://scholar.harvard.edu/schwarz/files/schwarz\\_2011\\_subjectual\\_visibility\\_and\\_the\\_negotiated\\_panopticon.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/schwarz/files/schwarz_2011_subjectual_visibility_and_the_negotiated_panopticon.pdf)) points out that: “In the last decade, the economy of visibility has transformed. New patterns of self-documentation relying on new technologies have changed the rules concerning who can (and may) see whom doing what and when.”

Schwarz is probably right, as one can argue that the challenge for Africa has always been that of image (of chaos, abject poverty and savagery) the internet represents a new means of redrawing this image, as well as epitomizing an economy of visibility. Literature in the online space thus becomes the new tool for Africa’s self-documentation. Here, this thesis is thinking through to how the internet allows the digital generation to escape the post-colonially framed narratives that have long shaped African literature. Alain Ricard and Flora Viet-Wild (2005)

lambaste this trend as the commodification of African literature. Readership, they say, “is manipulated by international bestseller lists, which engender and privilege highly specific literary tastes and emotional propensities.” Like Ricard and Viet-Wild, a few literary critics and emerging voices are pointing out that much of the literature that was published in the book age was geared to cater to western readers. Manuscripts were often edited by publishers who expect certain images of Africa to be presented in texts in order to ensure their marketability to readers and judges of literary prizes. The Nigerian critic Ikhelo R. Ikheloa (10 August 2012) who is an ardent supporter of online African literature argues in a conversation on USA-Africa Dialogue listserv that:

“Specifically, with respect to what is known as "African" writing, we really are looking at orthodox definitions - from the book. It is no longer very helpful I argue, especially to the extent that the world views Africa from the prism of that medium (the book). Think of those who represent African writing, they are virtually all in the Diaspora taking advantage of robust resources to offer their views. The Internet is now a muscular force and our scholars must begin to look at that medium as perhaps more reliable as a source of stories than books.”

Ikheloa stresses this position again in his Facebook status update on August 16, 2012.

“I believe that social networks have been great for literature. Adjusting to the new paradigm is going to be a challenge but social media and the Internet have the potential of lifting African literature into greater heights, past walls of mediocrity. It is a good thing for writers especially those who previously had no voices. I don't know how else I would have met fresh new Nigerian writing.”

Ikheloa’s view on the potential of online African literature is similar to the argument of this thesis; that since scholars and cultural policy makers use literature to provide historical and

anthropological evidence, it is in the online space that we will be able to see literatures-that actually mirrors contemporary Africa. In their analysis of the robustness of cyberspace in allowing Africans to use literature to tell their own stories without succumbing to postcolonially framed narratives, two of Kenya's leading digital writers and academics, Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi (2011) point out that *Koroga*, the online writers and photographers collaborative project, was created:

“In part, by a specular alienation that has been part of our personal and professional histories. Participants in a global modernity still heavily dominated by the global North, we as *Koroga* artists are constantly bombarded with images of ‘Africa’ that do not resemble either our memories or our imaginaries. As Africans, our subjective and concrete experiences of ‘home’ are constantly over-written, always framed by other voices and imaginaries about Africa. Western imaginaries frame Africa with such authority that the visual symbols used by the Kenyan government in its official images are indistinguishable from those deployed by a colonial government insistent on spectacularly empty vistas, ‘exotic’ wildlife and the picaresque ‘authentic’ pastoralist peoples. Indeed, Kenyan photographers wishing to participate in the global commerce in spectacle and alert to the unmistakable characteristics of marketable images of Africa often model their own photographic practices on the undeniably lucrative visual tropes entrenched by the Western imagination.”

Like Ikheola, Macharia and Mwangi see literature in print as too limiting, as too ready to document and present an African that maybe exists only in western imagination. Cyberspace allows writers to take control of their own work and voice, because they can write in a style that may not necessarily conform to a publisher's house-style or expectation. It is this artistic control that many pre-colonial artists enjoyed, and which only a few writers now enjoy in the world of book publishing. Moreover, the internet allows writers the possibility of unlimited

time and space to publish their work. Unlike the limited amount of space available in newspapers and magazines, the internet allows writers to use literature to pass political messages to readers in inexpensive and interactive ways, something which book publishers and print publication editors may not have allowed.

Furthermore, what is different in the digital age is that while the broadcast and the print media in most African countries are owned by the government and the rich, the digital media of internet and the mobile phone is now accessible to many Africans, in a way that the old media can only imagine. With the new media medium, individuals or a collective of people can set up and manage their own web presence, without the control or censorship of either the national government or big publishers. Readers can in turn, carry, access and store contents in a variety of forms and from different places at their own convenience. As Jenny Kidd (2010) reminds us:

“The inherent qualities of the digital media (with their origins in code) actually favour access, malleability, reproducibility and sharing. As all data are converted into numeric forms which can be read and conveniently stored on computers, they become more transportable, connectable and less geographically and materially centred with an authentic ‘original’. As information is de-materialised, it can be compressed in smaller spaces, accessed at high speed and in non-linear ways, and, can be manipulated. Encryption and database management mean information storing, access and sharing are possible.” (<http://culturalpolicyjournal.org/current-issue/are-new-media-democratic/>).

As more and more Africans gain access to the digital space, this thesis is arguing that unlike the old media, new media is allowing literature to reach more Africans than ever before. This also shows a form of democracy as cyberspace gives readers the right to respond and also allows writers an opportunity to discuss their works with readers and their contemporaries. African literature on social networks of Facebook and Twitter now prompts instant and real-time reactions from writers and readers.

However, attitude to this postcolonially-framed narrative is complex; other young writers like Richard Ali and Myne Whitman say they are using the internet to write their own stories to by-pass traditional publishers, but without necessarily using literature to write back to the West. For these writers, the goal is to write fiction and poetry that target African readers first and the rest of the world second. The people behind many of these online publications regularly request short stories, poems and essays that speak to the African experience in the twenty-first century.

### **The Idea of the ‘Private’ as used in this Thesis**

Raine Koskimaa ( March 2007) urges us to bear in mind that the nature of literature in the digital age may be different from the cultural context of the past, especially with regard to the way it is being produced and distributed. He argues that we need “to see literature as a media operating amongst others.” Koskimaa’s argument is poignant with regard to this thesis, where it is argued that the African writer in the twenty-first century needs to be seen both as an artist (in the traditional way) and an ambassador for popular culture. This is because in order to fully grasp the context of what she is writing, the conventions surrounding the online writing



space, in which a writer as a digital trendsetter is more intimate with his readers and audience than ever before, need to be acknowledged.

As a matter of fact, many young writers are ‘friends’ of their readers on Facebook and on Twitter. In social networking, the word ‘friend’ is simultaneously a noun and a verb for the writer and her readers. A reader can add a writer to his (the reader’s) friend-list, which is to ‘friend’ the writer, or vice-versa. If the ‘friend’ request is accepted, both the writer and the reader become virtual friends, able to see each other’s personal life in pictures and in videos. On Twitter, several African writers ask their readers to ‘follow’ them through tweets. Some of the writers whose work this thesis will be considering regularly share family photos, day-to-day activities, political thoughts and fashion tips with their readers on social media, alongside short stories and poetry.

The idea of the private is often ascribed to the sexual (muted, spoken or represented as a metaphor) and while this is germane, the notion of the private as being used in this thesis, is however, actually about the writer’s own personal life. This study is thinking about the way in which a writer’s private lifestyle is now on display for readers in the social media and since many of these writers see the online space as liberating, fiction and poetry often reflect writers’ personal views on various subjects including sexuality. In addition to this, writers use the social media to interact closely with readers in a way that could not have been possible during the golden era of the book, so much so that the daily personal life of a writer like Chika Unigwe, for example, is wide open to her readers, many of whom are also her Facebook friends. When Wainaina’s relationship with a lover ended, he blogged it as a Facebook status update on April 29, 2012, and this in turn inspired a few love poems posted on his Facebook page. Sokari Ekine, Shailja Patel and Zanele Muholi’s role as queer activists is often documented in pictures on Facebook alongside these two women’s creative work. Real life characters in these images sometimes make it into creative work. Muholi and Ekine

often post nude photographs from their various workshops alongside poetry. In the process they are demystifying what Adichie (2008) sees as the stultifying sexual hypocrisy of contemporary Africa imposed mainly through Islam, Christianity and colonial modernity.

Adichie's argument is germane. Olajubu (1972) in the *Journal of American Folklore* argues that there were more sexually explicit texts available in the open in pre-colonial Yoruba society than in the contemporary era:

“to the Yoruba, sex has a sacred function...[but] in spite of this, however, physical exposure of the sexual organs in life and in art, especially in carvings, is allowed... Obvious references to sex in words, gestures, and songs are also permitted on special occasions. On doors and veranda posts of temples and palaces can be found carvings of women with pointed, oversized breasts, and men with oversized penises. In some cases, for example, on the doors of Ife Town Hall, carvings of men and women in the sex act are depicted.” (Quoted in Femi Osofisan, 2008).

Just as Adichie sees this newly-found openness as reprising the openness of some pre-colonial African societies, Ori Schwarz (2011) likewise argues that new media technology is returning the world into a small village, in which gossip, as content, is the king:

“In this allegedly emergent world, people are constantly aware of being potentially documented, lying makes no longer sense, and misbehaviour cannot be concealed, so much so that living under complete transparency is the least worst method of coping with 'mob vigilantism'.”

([http://scholar.harvard.edu/schwarz/files/schwarz\\_2011\\_subjectual\\_visibility\\_and\\_the\\_negotiated\\_panopticon.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/schwarz/files/schwarz_2011_subjectual_visibility_and_the_negotiated_panopticon.pdf)).

We did not know who Wole Soyinka's children are or who Ben Okri is married to or which party Ngugi attended last week, but intimate details of today's writers' lifestyle are open to readers, and writers are using these digital interactions as a way of marketing their work and as a means of buttressing their position as digital cultural ambassadors. Therefore, literature that is produced under this condition of openness may be seen as reflecting the truth. So, what was once considered as private to the writer is now commonly shared with readers. The result of this is that texts are arguably becoming grounded in reality as art no longer pretends that it is not striving to mirror real-life experience. Therefore, the nature of texts within the new media landscape and the close interaction between the writer and her readers within this medium probably means that the distinctions and value judgements associated with particular forms of publication are not as strong as they once were. In the process, readers are starting to embrace different values regarding literature beyond those validated through the more traditional ideas of a canon.

### **The Concept of Generations of Modern African Writers**

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin (1942) takes a progressionist view of time, as one of the many famous examples that set up duality or dialectic of "history" and "newness." Progress, he argues, is not just about looking forward but also about borrowing from the past by looking backward. Not so long ago, critical inquiries into the question of (post) modernity had to grapple with the tension between the past (that is, history) – and the present (which implies newness). In this thesis, we see several young writers hinting at the freedom that the internet gives them as individuals as representing a breakaway from the constriction of the physical space and the expectation of the past. While we can see

that some of the issues that literature is reporting online are not new at all, what is new is that fresh perspectives are being brought to bear on issues such as homosexuality, prostitution and class. But this thesis recognises that every historical age is in one way or another driven by an impulse to distinguish itself from the past — hence the commonplaceness of newness as a figure of self-configuration.

This thesis has loosely divided modern African writers into three generations: The first generation of modern African writers is mainly the canons - writers like Léopold Sédar Senghor, Augusto Neto, Wole Soyinka, Ama Aita Aidoo and Ngugi wa Thiong'o- who came into their own before and during the 1960s - Africa's decade of independence. The second generation is mostly writers who became established in the 1980s and 1990s, such as Ben Okri; and the third generation comprises emerging voices who are just coming into their own such as Binyavanga Wainaina, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Petinah Gappah. Ogaga Okuyade (2012) rightly articulates the idea of three different generations of African writers as espoused by this thesis. Okuyade points out that "the older generation novelists were too close to the colonial tensions in Africa, which made cultural conflict the dominant thematic concern of their creative engagements."

The second generation of African writers include those born after the year 1960. This generation is what Okuyade refers to as writers "who got disillusioned by the monumental failure of Africa's emergent leaderships," and who "used their art to engage issues bordering on self-re-examination or appraisal." The third-generation of writers, according to Okuyade "seems more versatile and more contemporary in their thematic preoccupations and is more global in their vision and style, especially in their exploration of issues like transnationality, exile, and cultural regeneration." This group includes writers born from the 1970 onwards and who came into their own in the twenty-first century.

While acknowledging the debt they owed the previous generations, some of the writers in the new media landscape argue that they are producing literature from a totally different perspective especially when it comes to issues like sexuality and gender. The online, they say, is ‘new art’. The speaker in the Kenyan writer Shailja Patel's (2010) poem *On New Art*, points out that:

some day I'll start a museum  
where all works of Art  
are for touching  
itchy fingers can sink  
into sculptures stroke  
grained canvasses trace  
calligraphy  
on manuscripts  
hands can swell...  
Art that stays intact  
will be retired

Patel's speaker lays emphasis on the mobility of text and of art in the new media age, which is moving away from the rigidity of the print medium. Patel sees African literature as moving onto the new media landscape. Art, as we know it is becoming digitized and the speaker is warning that arts that refuse to take their place within the electronic landscape are in danger of becoming moribund.

In an article by Foreignpolicy.com, Wainaina points out that "the new generation is less concerned with old hatreds than with contemporary issues like gender roles and AIDS."

(Alexandra Polier, 8 August 2006).

Yvonne Owuor, a Kenyan contemporary of Wainaina points out that this: "is the coming of age of another generation, questioning values and claiming our space without apology."

(Alexandra Polier, 8 August 2006).

The Nigerian writer Sefi Atta, echoes similar view:

"I always say to people that every generation gets the writers they deserve. The previous generation had writers like Soyinka, Achebe; they had come of age at a time when there was a nationalist struggle, and then we got our independence. And for a short while, Nigeria belonged to them. And shortly afterward it was taken away from them by the military... "I came of age at a time that there was military rule, so I never had that sense that Nigeria was a country I could fight for. It never belonged to me. And so a lot of my writings expression that frustration that you feel detached from the politics of Nigeria and you're not quite sure why." (Carol Hills, 7 June 2011:

<http://www.theworld.org/2011/06/nigeria-writers/>)

For Tolu Ogunlesi, who is another member of the internet generation, emerging voices were born in an era of disillusionment:

"We were born into a Nigeria that had fallen apart. And in a sense, what we are seeing is sort of attempting to come together... You can no longer identify people by postage stamps, for example, you know. The New Yorker joke where a dog sitting behind the

computer says ‘on the Internet no one knows you’re a dog.’ So on the internet, nobody knows that you’re 3rd world, you know developing world. It’s worked a lot in my favour.” (Carol Hills, 7 June 2011: <http://www.theworld.org/2011/06/nigeria-writers/>).

### **The Writer as Reporter**

An important aspect of this study is its focus on the role of the African artist as a reporter of events and a recorder of history, without neglecting the fact that he or she is also an entertainer. The chapters in this thesis trace connections and networks of influence between new media and elements of history, economics, religion, politics and sexuality in Nigeria and Kenya in particular, and in Africa in general. The objective is to analyse cyberspace as a place where literature meets 'new' African journalism, as literature and news stories are increasingly talking to, and mimicking one another in the digital space. A poem or fiction posted on Facebook, as well as the writer’s personal Facebook status are becoming narratives that often reflect the news circle. And so we are witnessing the age of fictional reportage and autobiographical fiction. As a matter of fact, Wainaina's Caine Prize winning *Discovering Home* is a good example of this phenomena.

Another example is Tony Mochama's online short story *The Road to Eldoret* (2008), a fiction about a middle class Kenyan farmer, M, who returns to his birth place - the small town of Muranga. M has tried to resist change for most of his life, as the narrator informs us that M “still drives the Datsun 10Y that he bought in 1972 when he was a twenty two year old boy.” Since M has not been to the Muranga for a very long time, he notices several changes; right from the street to his hotel room. The narrator tells us there "was a television set in the hotel room with one of those fancy new satellites that one finds everywhere these days, even

in tiny little bars in Muranga where the boys wear foolish 'Manchester United' and 'Arsenal' T-shirts like silly English blokes and speak with animation of 'van Pussy Cats' and 'Lonaldo.' In his day, this excitement was exclusively reserved for the girls – who was “digging Muthoni's mo-go-do” or Njeri's, that's what got the lads hot in his hey-day, not weird African men with curly kits on their heads and Croat sounding names like Drogba."

M's trip to his hometown reveals some of the changes that are happening in much of Africa, where the forces of twenty-first century globalisation have touched every facet of contemporary life, even in a small town like Muranga. But M's Kenya is not only in the midst of economic changes, politics is likewise changing Kenya, albeit for the worse this time. M's journey away from Eldoret leads him into the political chaos that was consuming Kenya at the end of the December 2007 general elections; the chaos that threatens to consume M and Kenya. M did not return to Eldoret alive, as he died on the way back home, like the many thousands of his fellow countrymen who died in the ethnic strife that took place from December 2007 to January 2008. And this particular work of fiction first published online on the *Kwani?* website (but has since been included in a print collection of short stories by the author) underlines the way in which online short stories and poems are regularly used to respond to offline politics.

On the Nigerian literature listserv Krazitivity, writers discuss politics every day of the week, and they often reflect these discussions in their creative writing. An example is this poem by Edwin Eriata Oribhabor. *Wit and all* (June 23, 2011) published on Krazitivity listserv:

A nation wakes  
to rake bombshells from the streets



innocent souls bombed to smithereens  
scenes of smoke dominate our streets  
Boko and haram are dancing on the streets  
celebrating horrific scenes from Borno to Abuja  
we celebrate new borns, not bombed souls

The artist in the African context for example, poet, griot, writer, craftsman, dancer, sculptor) often functions in a variety of roles and capacities beyond the more obvious calling of the creator of aesthetics and entertainment. The artist is importantly, also a recorder of history and a reporter of current affairs. While the artist may likewise double as a healer, philosopher, and as the custodian of social mores, in addition to various other roles the society may impose on the artist (See Niyi Osundare in *Kiss & Quarrel*: 2002), all these responsibilities can arguably be said to be encompassed in the artist's duty as a reporter and recorder.

Thus out of the diversity of his many duties, it is these two roles that provide a consistent and enduring image of the African artist over many centuries and into the present new media age. So, the African artist can be said to be a sophisticated professional entrusted with a variety of roles, which he must carry out diligently and with adequate craftsmanship in order to maintain his reputation and to also ensure the stability of the text. Oribhabor's speaker reflects a growing concern among Nigerian writers in the online space, as well as millions of their fellow citizens, over the wave of bombing in northern Nigeria around 2011; attacks which are allegedly being carried out by an Islamic fundamentalist group known as Boko Haram. The interplay between politics, the individual online and offline reality, as well as fictional narratives points to a potential challenge to traditional views of reading texts.

Furthermore, this study will show how some of the new creative works from Nigeria and Kenya are spearheading a new kind of literary and journalistic discourse: one that has the capability to go beyond the dry official voices of the last 50 years and is opening up new socio-cultural and socio-political spaces, in cyberspace and in the offline space. The poetry and short stories in the online space contain substantial amounts of verisimilitude as writers become reporters engrossed in mapping out social realism in the digital space.

Literature in the online space is thus a site in which fictional characters represent themes coming out of national politics and some of the real-life characters that populate this space. Online literature can therefore, serve as reliable evidence of some of the changes and challenges facing contemporary Africa, since these themes are reflected in the statements and behaviour of fictional characters in new narratives and in the implicit or stated positions of emerging literary voices as cultural ambassadors. These texts illustrate how online African literature can provide us with an immediate and intimate sense of real-life events.

## **Methodology**

Jacques Derrida in *Grammatology* (1967) argues that in writing there is "nothing outside the text" (<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/derrida.htm>). Derrida is right; literary studies is not science, everything we do is subjective, hence our reliance on the text. The methodology for this PhD research is based on a qualitative analysis and interpretation (thematic and topical) of how new literary voices are depicting sexual politics, especially the discourse of homosexuality and the libidinal economy, and the role that class is playing within the politics of sex. The focus is on the themes emerging from work being published online and how this development complements and differs from the book. This study is also interested in how this creative writing reflects the condition of online publishing and the people that populate cyberspace. Since Derrida argues that our focus in literary

studies should be on the text, this study's main focus is on texts and my own interpretation of them.

Although texts published online and in print are the main focus of this thesis, I also used conversations on listservs and the social media as supporting evidence in my analysis. In the course of carrying out this study, I joined online groups including Ederi, USA-Africa Dialogue, Krazitivity, Concerned Kenyan Writers, as well as social media pages and blogs on African literature in addition to writers' blogs and social media pages. Being privileged to these conversations gave me an invaluable insight into the worldview of a new generation of African writers in a way that would have been impossible twenty years ago. Like much of research in the discipline of literary studies, this thesis takes an observatory approach in looking at online African communities, the texts, postings as well as conversations emanating from these gatherings. I selected materials that I think are relevant and important to this study and I archived them online. As Odutola (2012: 38-39) explains on African cyber-communities:

“In effect, the everyday talk of participants at various online forums lends themselves to a valid construction of knowledge and by extension memory of the recent past...If ‘talk’ is not to be limited to speech alone, voice encoded within written text can be part of valid data in the understanding of how citizens think about their nation and their national identities.”

It is important to point out that this thesis can be categorised into two, albeit interrelated parts; the first two chapters focus on class whilst the remaining chapters focus on sexuality within the discourse of modernity, of which the internet is an integral part. For the examination of class consciousness, I have used some of Karin Barber's (2007) analyses of

oral and contemporary African texts to buttress my argument that the idea of social class predates colonial rule in many African societies. I will be basing my argument also on my own interpretation of Yoruba orature as well as in the interpretation of some of the poems young writers are publishing online. In my analysis of sexuality and some of the new work published in cyberspace, I have relied on the theories and hypotheses formulated by three scholars, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Oyeronke Oyewumi. Foucault, because of his well-grounded analysis of the way the human body is being monitored. Foucault is also important because of his scholarship on sexuality and Euro-modernity. Butler and Oyewumi provide this thesis, with theories that foreground the way in which Euro-modernity creates the notion of gender distinctions and performances, and how European and African men perpetuate this agenda.

The objective of this thesis is not mainly to make big bold claims about online African literature or to romanticize the radical nature of the new media age. Writers are political actors and as Castells (1996: 476) reminds us “whoever the political actors, and whatever their orientations, they exist in the power game through and by the media, that includes computer-mediated communication networks.” With regard to African literature online, the power game that Castells is referring to here can be linked to the language of the internet and accessibility to online contents. Much of the creative work from Nigeria and Kenya is written in English, which means that the majority are excluded from this online conversation. In addition, since affordability equals accessibility, the cost of downloading web contents on mobile phone and on other digital devices may be unaffordable to many who have to survive on two dollars a day. Therefore, given their educational background and the ease with which many young writers can access the internet, means that they are among the digital elite.

With regard to African literature, this online generation is a transnational generation. Because of their education and because of their talent, many of them find it easy to secure visas to

travel to places most Africans can only manage to see on the television and hear about on the radio. Some like Wainaina, Sefi Atta, Chika Unigwe and Adichie spend a lot of their time in the West. These writers are, therefore, people who are often at home in Lagos, London and Los Angeles. Many other young African writers who are based on the continent likewise divide their time between Africa, Europe and North America, and regularly act as cultural ambassadors for their countries and the continent. And when they are not physically travelling across these different geographical spaces, they are interacting with the outside world in cyberspace.

This ability to easily criss-cross the Atlantic signifies the privileged positions that a group of Africans enjoy in contrast to the majority who live on less than two American dollars per day. In the first two chapters, I argue that while the outside world may not realise that class distinction exists in Africa, for some young African writers, online is the space where class consciousness can be articulated and projected. In chapter two, I argue that in the quest to show this privileged side of Africa, there is now a middle class consciousness in the literature being published in the online space, which may be leading to the pathologizing of the lower class fictional characters. In chapter four, I argue that fictional representations of queer Africans largely revolve around middle class gays and lesbians, and this means that poor people are missing from literary imagination. Perhaps, this is because most of the writers and readers in the online space are middle class Africans, with some of them identifying with the global middle class and choosing to be less connected to people who are not digitally wired and those who exist in the periphery of the online space. Suffice it to say that while online African literature may be imaginatively exploiting the freedom of cyberspace and the digital age, class and sexual identities depicted in some of the new writing show us that freedom from constraint can also mean imprisonment in alternate structures of economic power, denial and frustration. However, in chapter one, we see writers reprising the oral tradition, the

same way in which the Swahili *tendi* poets did in the early days of print almost four centuries ago.

While the publisher and the writer are often the only authority in the way texts are constructed and consumed, some of the poets using the digital space are embracing the freedom that it provides, and by so doing they are bypassing the gatekeeping role of publishers, by posting work straight online in their blogs, listservs and social networking space. Like the ancient Griot, the twenty-first century poet is allowing texts to be mediated upon by readers, and texts are in turn very flexible. This fits into the new ways of doing art which the speaker in Shailja Patel's poem is talking about. In the remaining chapters, this thesis analyses the queering of the African space online and also examines modernity and the trope of the prostitute in the digital age. Here we see African literature articulating some of the important issues – and what used to be taboo subjects - that young Nigerians and Kenyans are discussing on listservs, blogs and on social networking websites of Facebook and Twitter. We see the African writer returning to the role of the reporter of current events and the recorder of history. In chapter three and four, this thesis will analyse what it sees as the homosexualization of the online African space, as emerging voices take a different approach from the older generation in their representation of homosexual characters. In these chapters, I will argue that the agenda of literature is not just concerned with exposing the endemic corruption of the postcolonial state but that it is now challenging the hypocrisy and lies surrounding African sexuality and history. In chapter three and four, we see the middle class African writer in the online space using literature to attack homophobia; some even argue that homophobia and capitalism are intractably linked. Thus the writer projects himself not as a mimic or an agent of capital, but a person who uses literature and the internet to disrupt the agenda of capitalism.

The last three chapters of this thesis are devoted to the issues of sexuality and body politics, and the impact of modernity on these discourses. Roy Porter (1989: 11-13) calls for a closer engagement with body politics. He points out that “body history must be part of big history. It must display the body as the inexhaustible generator of representations for society at large, and as a crossroads of power, the new pineal gland mediating between personal and public, private and political.” More than two decades on, some of the young African writers and poets in the online space are using literature to depict the African body as a category of historical analysis. And as literary studies about African bodies have brought about continuous encounters, clashes, and border-crossings between varieties of spaces, these chapters look at the African body as represented in online creative works and the sexual politics that have long surrounded this body. Some of these writers are using the freedom of the digital space to focus attention on marginalised bodies, especially the history of spectrality surrounding those Africans who do not conform to the sexual norm.

While literature in the print age helped articulate the idea of nationhood and Pan-Africanism, online literature along with the rise of the middle class are now arguably the catalyst for the ‘coming out’ of African marginalised identities. Similar tactics that were used in fictional representations of the figure of the African homosexual are employed by some writers who look at the figure of the prostitute, and this is demonstrated in chapters six and seven, where this thesis is looking at the works of writers such as Chika Unigwe, Muthoni Garland, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta and a few of their contemporaries. Some of the emerging works in the online writing space show that prostitution (or sex work) is both a form of capitalist exploitation within the concept of globalisation as well as a form of female

empowerment when we look at the way in which modernity's dictated gender performances are being disrupted by these women.

In addition, this chapter argues that the place of the libidinal woman within the libidinal economy puts the prostitute as one of the key figures of the globalised market economy, be it as a trafficked sex worker, a prostitute trying to make ends meet or as an educated woman who is willing to use her body to climb the socio-economic ladder. Chapter five, however, takes a more cautionary approach by warning that not all emerging writers in the online space take similar liberal attitudes towards African sexuality. Tracing the impact of colonial modernity on African literature, this chapter will show that fictional works in the online space can also mimic some of the conservatism of the book age.

Whether striking a liberal pose in their poetry and fictional representations or standing as vanguards of morality, the online writing space shows the new way in which African writers use literature to depict everyday political engagements. Kenyan and Nigerian creative works within cyberspace show the internet as a site of cultural performance and politics, and what is being published and consumed by readers in the online space is relevant and important in this new media age.



## CHAPTER ONE

### AFRICAN POETRY IN A DIGITAL AGE

In the introduction to my PhD thesis, I argued that for many African writers in the new media space, cyberspace sometimes serves as a space for what may later appear in print, but most of these works (sometimes fragmented and at times short intricate pieces) remain within cyberspace. This research, while it is primarily about online literature, believes it is impossible to fully engage with these emerging voices, without making an analytical comparison between the present and the tradition that came before it, and how the present differs from, or augments what came before. In this chapter, we will see why an increasing number of young African writers are putting their poems on social networking spaces and I want to analyse how these online texts or cybertexts are organised around not just the present but also on the broad theme of the contemporary interpretations of the past.

On a global scale, Diana Saco (2002) points out that discussions on the benefit of the internet tend to fall into two schools of thought; those who believe that the online is changing societies in a positive way because it is democratic and allows for the exchange of ideas; and the other school which sees the internet as numbing people's minds because of information overload and that this information can be inaccurate or unnecessary. On several African listservs, there have been discussions on the quality of what is being published online as far as literature is concerned and most people tend to support the idea of African poetry and fiction moving online where they can be accessible to a wider African audience than a print publisher could achieve. In addition, poets and writers whose works would otherwise have been gathering dust on the shelves of publishing houses are now finding an avenue to publish poems that many readers can enjoy on a variety of new media platforms.

New media technology continues to give writers new avenues to shape, recreate, possess, re-live, experience, remember forgotten old cultural practices and create new contemporary cultural values. For many young writers and poets, the online is not the exclusive of the book or oral performance as they use these mediums in a way that suggests the oral, the print and the online complement one another, and that they are all germane to African literature in the digital age. For example, poetry posted on Facebook may be performed for members of the public in the real space of Lagos and Nairobi, and the recording of those performances may be posted on Facebook for consumption by the online public. These works may also appear as part of a collection of a creative book project. These processes arguably involve a process of reshaping the text for different formats, and in the process the creative piece is unfixed and susceptible to changes. One can, therefore argue that the movement of texts across different mediums signals an important way through which some of the emerging African voices negotiate the relationship between their works, themselves and their audience.

In the online space, some of the poems and short stories speak to the online processes of collective memory production (both subversive and conventional), place-making activities and identity construction processes. In many poems we can see objects and monuments of the past being re-appropriated and given new meanings. At times, these texts strive to evoke the ancient potent meanings of African texts and at other times they reflect the fluidity of orature and cyberspace. Karin Barber (2007: 75) argues that African poetry is flexible and accessible. She points out that in African orature " 'fixing' chunks of text is the condition of possibility of a poetics of fluidity." Barber also reminds us that African orature is compactly solid and durable. So in the process it becomes an object that produces new materialities.

The use of the online writing space falls within the scope of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). One interpretation of this mode of communication, which has

gained wide acceptance among cybercultural theorists, is that of Denis McQuail (2005), who suggests that CMC is any communicative transaction that takes place via the use of two or more networked computers. But given that we no longer need to be by a computer to speak to one another in order to communicate nowadays; we can aptly include mobile phone to mobile phone communications, as well as communication between all digital devices as part of CMC.

Some cybertheorists see a community as being a passive, apolitical, problematic and essentialist entity. This particular position comes from an Archimedean view of human relations and social formations (see Honig, 1993 and Studdert, 2008.) As African literature has found a permanent home across many mediums of the digital space, this thesis agrees with Castells (2000), who sees these new communities as the essential unit of the modern society, where important socio-political activities and cultural structures are organised around new technologies. From the print era to the age of broadcast media, African artists have continuously made technological spaces African, and in the same fashion as the eras before, they are now imposing themselves on the “non-African” space that is new media. In addition to claiming this space as their own, Africa, as Meenakshi Mukherjee (1989) points out, is often central to their experience. In Castells' view, these new cyber-communities are the emerging social morphology of our age.

### **Cybertext and the Concept of Class**

Cybertext like oral text, as I am going to be arguing in this chapter, is class-oriented in its composition, delivery and audience. Historical analysis shows that text and class can be linked together. Karin Barber (2007) highlights how Yoruba poetries of Itan and Oriki are the properties of the ruling classes and their chiefs. These texts also show how the themes of

subjugation can be seen in oral literature of the Yoruba people. Ifa corpus and Oriki are the intellectual class oral texts which often invoke conformity to societal norms as laid down by traditional rulers. In fact, some of these texts were used to justify royal excesses such as during the slave trade with European merchants. For example, blue-blood Egba people of Abeokuta and its environs have in their oriki this saying: "omo ajogberu, majo gbedu; eru ni sin ni, eko isin ni'yan" - (trans: he who dances to collect slaves; slaves are meant to worship you and not food.)

On the other hand, Yoruba folktales such as 'alo' are narratives of the lower classes; and often, they narrate how one can rise above one's station in life through good luck, honesty and hard work. An example of this is articulated by the popular Yoruba adage "ninu ofi ninu ola ni omo pandoro ndagba" – (trans: children of peasants may go through hardship and poverty, but would end up growing to become great men.)

Many of the bards and the poets of pre-colonial Nigeria also articulate the concerns of the poor and popular views in their renditions, even as they were serving as underlings to the ruling classes. Landeg White (1989) and Karin Barber (1991) highlight the notion of 'poetic license' across ancient Africa. As White infers:

"oral poetry is permitted a freedom of expression which violates normal conventions...Chiefs and headmen may be criticized by their subjects, husbands by their wives, fathers by the children, employers or overseers by their workers, and the political rulers by their subjects in ways that the prevailing social codes would not normally permit so long as it is done through poetry" (see Karin Barber in *Bulletin of the John Rylands, University Library of Manchester, Vol 73, Number 3, Autumn 1991*).

In the contemporary era, Barber (1995) alludes to the fact that certain texts, most notably the travelling theatres of the last century were the property of the lower middle classes, just as the novel genre was mostly the preserve of the upper and the professional middle classes.

While race and nation theories are two of the most identifiable primary paradigms with which postcolonial theory has long been associated, in Nigeria and Kenya, class more than anything influenced cyber-discourses and online literature, as it had long impacted on much paper-based creative writing work. Class consciousness cannot be divorced from fictions, poetries and essays, since we continue to use literary materials as anthropological and historical evidence. In addition, Ngugi (1997) asserts that "literature is about wealth, power and values and their effects on the quality of human lives and relations" (24). If we are going to be using writers and literature as representing Africa and Africans, it is germane for us to examine the way their social background has impacted on emerging texts.

People in Africa have been class conscious for many centuries but little attention has been paid to how texts encapsulate class. While there is no shortage of studies on class analysis in the western world (these include Borislav Knezevic (2003) Ehrenreich (1990) and Dimock & Gilmore (1994) as good examples), literary analysis on class formation in the postcolonial world of Africa, the Indian sub-continent and the Caribbean, are few and far between. And these are states, which have not only produced talent that have shaped postcolonial studies over the years, but these are also countries that have linked history to the Atlantic world.

In the West, the idea of working class literature has been around for a long time, along with the notion of literature of the middle classes. These attributes, however, have not been applied to the south or the so-called "Third World", and instead, postcolonial studies and

even African studies have been too short-sighted in seeing non-western societies as merely subjugated people. Where such acknowledgement of African class narratives has been made, it has occurred within non-African scopes. When class is theorized or framed in the African space, it is often within the framework of race. Lott (1994) argues that class is becoming less of a significant factor in many western nations such as the United States, where class consciousness was partly constructed through the discourse of blackness and marginality. Class identity was examined through racial experience in the Atlantic world and how that played out in the context of slavery and colonialism. Thus, black experience in the Americas became the experience of the marginalised underclass. Similar appropriation of marginality also became the central focus of African literary discourse.

But if we are to investigate modern African identity and the construction of self, in light of globalising and localising tendencies, the question of social class cannot be ignored. These factors have impacted on Africa in the past two to three decades, bringing with them a varying degree of economic development and unbalanced buying power, and a deep chasm between the rich and the poor.

Several factors may have stood against a thorough examination of class in literary texts. One of these can be linked to the preoccupation by African theorists with the need to counter western perception of Africa as a place of constant chaos. African writers and theorists are fixated with writing back to the West and they often use literature to firm Africa's humanity. They feel the need to respond to views such as that of Saul Bellow, when he remarks: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans?" (see Mel Gussow and Charles McGrath, 2005 in [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)).

Another essential factor is postcolonial theorists' long obsession with the narratives of the coloniser versus the marginalised. Here theorists have failed to take into consideration the fact that an understanding of class in the postcolonial world will lead to a better comprehension of the underlying issues of politics, exploitation and sexuality. This is not to say that the analysis of histories of exploitation and subjugation are not necessary, in fact, postcolonial studies have helped in articulating the enduring impact of slavery, colonialism and racism in the postcolonial society. However, these factors are also closely related to the ideas of class and social formations, and by analysing class, we may be able to better understand the causes that postcolonial studies have been theorizing.

The above limitation has stifled the examination of how class identities are constructed and articulated in African texts, within and through the discourses that support late capitalism. One can trace this to the domination of postcolonial discourses by Marxist and Fanonist theorists. Many left-leaning theorists subscribe to Frantz Fanon's notion of a false decolonisation (see David P. Thomas, 2009: 253-269).

While this study agrees that Fanon's position is tenable, an analysis of literary texts can help us interrogate contemporary conditions in Africa. Moreover, this analysis rests on an understanding of post-colonialism as problematic, rather than as a chronological or temporal concept.

As depicted in the previous paragraphs, we can see that from pre-colonial texts to contemporary online musings, class consciousness is not limited to European historicity. Class and social groups operate across many African cultures. In addition, we can deduce that a particular text - this time in the mode of online literature - centred on a particular social

group is also not a new precedent in Africa. Moreover, capital has always played a great role in the composition and delivery of African texts since time immemorial; the Igbo people of Nigeria say “it is the man that has eaten well that plays music. If he has not eaten he will be compelled to pick up a hoe, not a harp.”

The poet is the artist who is well fed and so is entrusted to speak on behalf of the society. He stratifies the divide between the poor and the rich, and from this he arguably derives the artistic license to criticise and praise these different sections of the society. And it is this artistic licence, which the print medium has managed to subjugate, and that the online medium is resuscitating within the Nigerian and Kenyan literary context. The Nigerian poet and academic Omosun Sylvester (16 February 2009) acknowledges this heritage in a praise poem *The Juju in the Poem (Ritual Space)*, which he posted on his poetry blog Tribal Poetry (<http://tribalpoetry.blogspot.com/>)

In search of my ancestral heritage  
I was drawn to my mind  
There I see within the stillness  
At the greatest of all beauty  
On the art born within,  
The limitless boundaries to all I can do  
To celebrate the festivity of my clan...  
Because my lineage were of the kings  
It was my art that I acted upon  
till elders bruised my feet on the tribal stone  
and I was crowned the Onojie  
By king makers in an Esan village



I write and edit in respect of them  
And speak the truth of legend of the tribe  
To appease the temper of the gods of the tribe  
Least they strike the poet on the tribe  
Before he get the press  
For lies against the Esan culture

In this poem, Sylvester not only carries the art of the praise poem into the digital age, this text also speaks of the privileged position of the traditional poet and the poem illustrates the division of labour that goes back to several centuries among Esan people of mid-Western Nigeria, and the place of the poet within that social ladder. The educated African middle class of which Sylvester is a member, arguably displaced traditional artists and priests, as the epicentre of African culture to much of the outside world. And at the centre of that displacement stands the poet as the intellectual, representing both the unorthodox and orthodox thinking. Their role is thus very similar to that of the Babalawos and the griots dating back to several centuries. The Babalawo, of course, is an important member of the traditional religious class, who Niyi Osundare (2002: 19) sees as a “multi-functional figure,” and who often functions as the community poet, a doctor, physician, psychotherapist, historian, Griot, bard and community leader. The notable scholar, senior academic and eminent Ifa priest Wande Abimbola (1997: 85) argues that “Ifa priests in West Africa are the intellectuals of their society. This was especially true before colonial rule. They had a lot of power and were part of the nobility.”

In the next chapter, I point out a disconnection from the African lower class in some fictional representations as I show that a few online short stories represent the way that class consciousness is being articulated partly through bourgeois representation on social

networking sites and other new media forums and through vocal appropriation of middle class identity. While some online short story writers choose to tailor their text to reflect purely middle class pursuits, some young online poets are trying to bridge this gap by referencing, privileging and stressing traditions in the online space. The young Nigerian writer Yemi Soneye, who was born in 1991, also acknowledges the debt that the digital generation owes the past. In the first part of the poem *It is Development* (30 November 2010), published in the Nigeria-based digital magazine Saraba (owned and run by a collective of young writers), the speaker tells us that:

Nothing is recently born.

All things are not new,

from primeval times they have been.

Only oscillations in form, we see and feel.

Or what are communal tales

told under gleaming trees

in the village square to

Facebook, Twitter and others?

Would ancient folders of roads

have had reason to race, fly or sail if

with a tap, they were at terminal?

Calls, SMS, MMS and Emails,

just as a talking drum, stroked

by the chosen, vibrated with Arokos,\*

these are the classic couriers.

Soneye's speaker is arguably telling us that the new cannot exist without the past; the digital cannot be divorced from the oral and the print age. Poetry in the online space is therefore not without precedent and emerging creative works should not be seen as totally separate from what came before because African texts in cyberspace bear imprints of the past. These young poets are indicating that their work speaks to explicit connections between the real space of Africa and cyberspace. The two worlds should not be seen as separate entities. And yet, the digital symbolises the new and we must acknowledge that it is different from the past. What young writers are doing online is therefore the continuum, but at the same time the present (and this continuum) reveals to us the narratives of now and those of the future. The terrain of the African text is shifting, as it always does, but the role of the artist as the 'classic courier' of the society still remains the same.

Soneye's speaker is alluding to the fact that the digital space may be the perfect platform for African texts in the same way that the old poets used traditional musical instruments along with dance and chants, to convey poetry to the public. The limited space on the mobile phone and the brevity of most email messages, in addition to the brevity with which the digital generation write in this space, arguably means that "SMS, MMS and Emails" are the new form of poetry. The Poet-Laureate for Britain Carol Ann Duffy shares this view in an interview published on [Guardian.co.uk](http://Guardian.co.uk):

“We've got to realise that the Facebook generation is the future – and, oddly enough, poetry is the perfect form for them. It's a kind of time capsule – it allows feelings and ideas to travel big distances in a very condensed form... "The poem is *the* literary form of the 21st century. "It's able to connect young people in a deep way to language ... it's language as play." (see Joanna Moorhead, 5 September 2011).

What the digital space may also be doing is providing a better way of breeding new poets and getting more young Africans to relate to poetry in a way that could have been impossible in the book age, as poetry and discussions about poetry are now being situated in the space in which an increasing number of young Africans play and congregate.

These poets arguably also see the danger of misrepresentation posed by some new fictional narratives in the new media space. They see the need to mediate between the traditional and the emerging bourgeoisie text. In their examination of new text, they see potentially new misrepresentations. They recognise the fact that the cyberspace offers a more potent space for citing new text as historical and anthropological evident about contemporary Africa, and warn that these pictures may be far away from reality.

Additionally, in an attempt to bridge the gap between the educated African middle classes and their unconnected fellow citizens, the poet in the cyberspace tries to represent the unconnected by harking back to African oral history and by marrying African tradition with the twenty-first century's contemporary culture and values. The poetry from the likes of Sylvester and Soneye reflects the way in which several middle class African poets have appropriated some of the skills of the old oral poets. And like the poets of old who used the public to hone their skills, some of the emerging voices are using readers in the online writing space to attain a higher level of literary skill and poetic perfection. And rather than reflecting purely middle class concerns some of their works seek to embrace an African epistemology.

By invoking “juju” Sylvester tells us that he seeks to challenge the dehumanisation of African tradition and to bring forgotten and neglected customs onto the digital age. Soneye on his part simply tells us that what his generation is now doing online is similar to what the ancient poets of old did in their own time.

### **The Audience and Cybertext**

Cutler (1996) argues that interaction is a prominent feature of cyberspace media technologies, which enhances conversational interaction. And just as oral performers inculcate audience responses into their materials and adapt text to the mood of the audience, poets in the online writing space are doing the same by inviting readers into partaking in the creative process, in addition to allowing outsiders to review work in progress and to make comment on these new materials.

On Ederi listservs, the poet Uche Peter Umez openly invites other poets to intervene on a poem in progress:

Dear bros and sis, this is open to scalpel and scythe

happy weekend

uche

in my land

here, love is ash

hate a flare

as noxious

as that of Shell

clouding

skies;

here, tyrant's fist

pounds

pain into hearts

sorrow

grinds souls...

here, no joy just

inchoate anger

against

pot-bellied few.

uche peter umez

A response from a reader goes thus:

Uche,

I grant that the worth of this poem could be revealed some time later. For now, though, I'm hard-pressed to impute value to it. Deriving inspirations from the past comments of some members of this group, I'd like to raise a few questions about "In

my Land.”

What nature of human experience does the speaker intend to convey? What human emotion? What idea? What minute, otherwise, ignored aspect of life does the poet want to disclose to the world? What aspect of history, life or heritage is the piece trying to preserve?

My understanding of an artist is that s/he is like somebody walking with another person in a jungle (the jungle of life?). S/he suddenly stops, calls the other’s attention to something: “Hei, look at this?” When the other looks, will there really be something new to see? Something unique? Something old that could be seen in a new light?

On another open and popular listserv, Nigerian World Forum, the poet Chidi Anthony Opara posted a new, somewhat sexually explicit, work titled ‘Demands of the Goddess’ on August 18, 2010. The submission also generated response. One commenter complained that, his previous admiration for the poet has been seriously compromised by this latest offering:

“I must openly confess that I have often browsed your lucid poetry and prose that anchor their plots on everyday human chores and experience; the imageries you capture span the individual, the family, the local govts, the state and nation, especially the daily experiences of the mis-ruled and mis-led in our contemporary African

societies. In all, I have silently commended your literary genius on its merit and level sophistication...

Now, I realize that genius sometimes exhibits undisciplined or amoral excesses; and as you know, unrestrained and unregulated habits can be uncomfortably unruly and distastefully repugnant. And that is how I evaluate your present poem, entitled 'Demands of the goddess', in which you painted a picture of the act of sex by humans in the most shameful interaction between a man (Iyiafor the god), the woman (Iyieke the goddess)... What a mess!

Frankly, without attempting any sanctimonious posture, I am moved to say that this poem is an epitome of genius misplaced and misapplied for shameless vulgarity, breach of public decency, and senseless trash-talk. It is juvenile and distasteful; and my advice is that your children should not inherit a literary legacy that includes these dirt."

What Umez and Opara show us is how the online literary space performs quality control and checks on African poetry and fiction, thus allaying the fear that in by-passing the traditional book publishing medium, poets and writers may be in danger of producing mediocre works. Poets regularly get advice on those elements of their work that readers and fellow poets believe are worth holding on to, verses that need improving upon and those that need to be discarded totally. And because those commenting on these works of literature are not physically making their views known before the writer but are doing so virtually, they can be honest and candid in their comment. While only a few people may get to read and comment on a collection of poetry before it is published in print, in the online space there are no limits on the number of people who can judge the merit of a creative work in progress. This evokes



the kind of checks and balances that ancient oral performers had to undergo before their peers and audiences.

The coming together on these social networking spaces also demands the disclosure of information, such as the inspiration behind a particular piece of creative writing and what the poet wants to achieve with a poem. In addition, while poets in these communities jealously protect their copyright they are also open to the idea of readers having an impact on the final outcome of their work. As a poet, Umez is not afraid of criticism as he thinks this will give his works the compact solidity and durability they need. In many instances the poems he posted on listserv and on Facebook are praised by his contemporary and readers alike. One can therefore see the emergence of a cyber-world and poet-reader cooperation, which Ryan (1994) envisaged. Furthermore, one can argue that Umez has benefited from his willingness to post his on-going works on social networking spaces, as a collection of his work, *The Runaway Hero* (2011), was nominated for the Nigeria's foremost literary prize the NLNG in 2011.

In cyberspace, African poetry is rediscovering orature's art of collaboration between the performer and his audience, which has been missing from books. And with other Nigerian poets putting their poems on social networking tools such as Facebook and Twitter, we are seeing online African literature reprising real-time collaboration between poets and their audiences. These new poems show the way in which African literary work and creative writers can connect and nurture relationships with prospective readers by effectively using social media and real-time online collaboration tools. And just as oral performers inculcate audience responses into their materials and adapt text to the mood of their audiences, poets in the online writing space are doing the same by inviting readers to participate in the creative process, in addition to allowing outsiders to review work in progress and to comment on

these new materials. The audience provides approval for online poetry and the cyberspace serves as a test-bed for work that may later go into print, just as traditional poets and musicians try out their new work before a live audience prior to going to print or the recording studio. The storyteller is using the online writing space to gauge the mood of his potential audience; altering textual expression, tone and temper to meet the situation created in relationship with the online audience. In the process, the final text is dynamic and very malleable.

And because cybertexts are not permanent, they are therefore naturally predisposed to allow continuous smaller scale changes by the poets with inputs from his audience. It is not just the content that is changing but how poetry is perceived in its final textual manifestation that is changing the poetics. Like the oral tradition, online texts may have no firm terrain due to the process of collaboration and intervention between the composer and the reader. The knock-on effect is that like orature, the meaning of cybertexts is unfixed and subjected to multiple interpretations.

Jay Bolter (1991) believes that the computer enhances the experience of writing through cyber-images. In the same fashion, African cyberpoets are re-introducing the elements of visual literacy found in many oral performances in online poems. In his YouTube poem, *Sudan. Sudan.* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGCE8l03vCg>), the Nigerian writer and poet Chuma Nwokolo (9 July 2009), combines the elements of sound, music, photographic imagery and video together, in order to convey his message to online audiences. In the process, he brings African oral tradition into the twenty-first century. With soft melody, the video begins on the bank of the River Nile in Khartoum, with a man lying on its concrete embankment under the shade of a tree, followed by photographic images of the poet's trip around Sudan. We did not see the face of the poet but his voice follows the

scrolling letters:

Sudan. Sudan.

Do you hear me call?"

Your lure has fallen on the souls that answer to your ancient name.

With breezing net,

Sudan, you seduce me also.

Look East!

Your Sun rises on a horizon of river palms.

Centuries count for slow minutes beside the longest river in the world

(<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IGCE8l03vCg>).

Sudan becomes a metaphor for Africa's glorious past and its recent troubles. The very essence of this poem can only be captured by the poet's use of photographic imagery, music, cybertext and his own voice. The moving images depict the complexities and diversities of Sudan and Africa. At the same time, they challenge the single story narrative that has become Sudan by invoking the multi-layered elements that have been buried in the familiar media portrayal. The visual, the spoken words and the cybertext, all play an equal role in conveying the poet's message to the reader. One will be meaningless without the remaining elements.

You torch your souls again.

Meroe burns again...

Those buried souls have gone

and flowered hope...

The words scroll and tease as they unravel, the unfolding images and the poet's voice capture Sudan's promises and failures. The subversiveness of vocal, visual and cybertext are combined together to challenge the Sudanese authority about goings-on in Darfur, and for the audience to see beyond the facade of serenity presented by the allure of the capital of Sudan, Khartoum, and the beauty of the glistening Nile. Nwokolo, like the court poet of- an old African kingdom, has been licensed by the freedom of the cyberspace to question the Sudanese authority about Darfur and the harsh reality of a theocracy/despotic regime. Like the ancient poet, the cyber-poet is using the tools of new media to criticise through the ploy of jokes and humour; he is trying to reprise the ability of the poet to question the antics of African rulers which other citizens may not be able to do for fear of reproach. In this online video, we witness the way in which poetry can be potentially critical of its subject matter and how the artist can manipulate texts in the artist's role as the voice of the society. The online allows texts like this one to criticise contemporary politics without any fear of censorship or reprisal. They can be described as coded criticism of Africa's big men and these coded messages can then be open to different interpretations by the online readers.

### **The Political Poetry Online**

In Kenya, Sahilja Patel is one of the country's leading performing poets, and some of her works in video and audio formats are to be found on YouTube, Facebook and various other new media and internet outlets. Patel is also a political activist, who uses her poetry such as the YouTube video *Make It* (15 October 2009), to speak on behalf of the marginalised such as gay Africans and underprivileged women. Online poetry performances like *Make It* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=36ZW-4E6cUg&feature=related> ) underline how politics has historically been one of the primary focuses of African poetry. For many artists, politics is a life-long devotion that rests on art's persistence and perseverance, as they often see their

roles as representing the voice of fellow Africans. The poetry of Ifa corpus places the Ifa priest/poet as the political voice who mediates between the spiritual and the political. He is the figure who the pre-colonial society consulted before the appointment of political figures within the Oyo Empire as well as the anointment of the King or Oba. In addition, poets and singers in several pre-colonial societies used their craft to point out the feelings of the larger community to the ruling classes. While recognising the fact that there is a connection between modern African poetry and Africa's colonial experience, Lewis Nkosi (1981) argues that several African poets in the modern era, such as Daniel Diop and Okot p'Bitek see themselves speaking for ordinary Africans by using their poems to respond to politics. Nkosi points out: "The energies of Diop's poetry is politics." (139). Oyeniyi Okunoye (2004: <http://etudesafricaines.revues.org/4817>) also argues that poetic traditions such as that of Ifa, are precursors to modern African poetry. In the modern era, much of the poetry by the likes of Okot p'Bitek, Dennis Brutus and Wole Soyinka is not only aesthetic but it has also been provocatively political. Okunoye aptly rejects Tayo Olafioye's (1984) assertion that African poetry is inferior to its Western counterpart because it is fixated with politics and not aesthetic. Instead, Okunoye sees the politics in contemporary African poetry as reflecting the society's phases of self-discovery.

Dozens of other Nigerian and African poets are also using the elements of social networking technologies also known as Web 2.0, to interact with online audiences in their blogs and YouTube postings. They include Bede Okoro (4 September 2009) in *My Home My Pride* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG39LQqoHBM&NR=1>), a video clip that is a mixture of images, written texts and audio, that illustrates the poet's journey from birth to adulthood, and his determination to win against the odds. There is also Chiedu Ifeozo's *The Struggle* (9 April 2008) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QX93dNjUiU8>), in which the poet only uses images and written texts alongside the music of the late African American hip-hop artist

Tupac, to chart the Nigerian youth struggle with a corrupt political class. Here, Ifeozo uses the internet as an important element of twenty-first century pop culture to enable poetry to speak to a global audience without hearing the voice of the poet himself.

Barber (2007: 139) highlights the role that audiences play in the composition and delivery of texts. She argues that through audiences “one can observe and interact with” and see “clues to the nature of the society they are part of. It is well known that coming together as spectators or auditors of collective cultural events can have the effect of making people aware of the things they share; of rousing them to collective action; and of furnishing the means for expression of collective sentiment.” So the likes of Patel and their audiences are using online poetry as a medium of expressing political outrage directed at both the African ruling class and their Western counterparts. These online works and performances are often used as tools to remind fellow Africans of the need for the politics of resistance, for which the internet allows greater capacity than in the book or in the offline space. The online space thus becomes the necessary pin-prick, the jab, the stimulus that sustains what is often slower, longer, arduous but necessary societal renewal.

The digital space gives African texts visual and writing capabilities, and for some young writers, these tools speak to the malleability and fluidity of text that Barber (2007) noticed in her many years of research into African orature. In their essay, *Hypertext, Hypermedia and Literary Studies: the State of the Art*, George P. Landow and Paul Delaney (1990) analyse the way that cyberspace and the growing use of digital technologies has transcended “the linear, bounded and fixed qualities of the traditional written text.” (3). The problem with the book is probably the fact that it constrains the poet since it is near impossible to convey controversial topics through publishers who may want to avoid incurring the wrath of a repressive government or who may even think certain materials are unsuitable for their readers. In

addition, changing poems that have been published as a book is often impossible and when it is possible the process is long and expensive. When a piece of text is published in the print format it can become out of date as the political or social situation may have changed, whereas a video clip of a poem or a poem posted on Facebook Note can be amended to reflect new elements at any time as long as there is an internet connection.

Furthermore, like ancient oral texts, Nigerian and Kenyan cyberpoems are able to incorporate their source of inspiration, music, imagery, the audience and the performer into the production process. Poems and blog musings can thus be improved upon and completed over time, in response to audience demand and reaction. In addition, one can see the possibility that the final production reflects inputs from the reader, in the same way that the audience impacts on the final production of oral text. This attempt at incorporating the audience into the text makes online poetry not only holistic but also as reprising the communal role of oral text.

In Kenya, several young poets, intellectuals and photographers have come together to start *Koroga*, an online project that marries poetry with photography. *Koroga* seeks to use photography to explain poetry and the poems to give meanings to the professionally-shot images. In a statement on the Koroga website (<http://koroga.tumblr.com/page/2>), Keguro Macharia, who is one of the project founders points out that *Koroga* “is another African story, a story of what we see and how we see, of meetings and transformations, of looking and seeing, of seeing and writing, of speaking into being the worlds we know, and those we are always imagining.” The statement also supports my earlier argument in the introduction to this thesis that the African artist is a reporter of events and a recorder of history.

The poetry and the images that are being posted in *Koroga* capture the life of Africans across social classes. For example, Phyllis Muthoni's poem *The Sandwich Bar* (5 September 2011) is supported by an image of an expensive restaurant taken by Jim Chuchu (2011). The poem seems to capture some of the intricate designs that we see in the image. Its speaker tells us that:

the glass is stained by roses

and bleeding hearts

the air is laden with significance and

sloughed off skin – palms clasped in

fresh embrace or reluctant exit.

(<http://koroga.tumblr.com/page/2>)

Marziya Mohammedali's poem *Sparks* (5 September 2011) is supported by another photograph taken by Jim Chuchu, however this time the image is that of a working class man, who is busy working on an electricity project. The speaker informs us:

Cautious and careful,

He climbs into place.

He feels the energy thrum

Under his fingertips,

The crackle and hum,

Of some lifeforce, enticing...



One second. Just one second.

And the life force turns deadly.

He twists from the pulsing embrace,

Slips to the safety of the ground.

(<http://koroga.tumblr.com/page/2> )

In these two posts, we see the contrast in the life of working class Africans and that of the professional middle classes. One speaker is concerned about the aesthetic make-up of a restaurant and the effect these designs have on the life of those who patronise the place.

While the other speaker illustrates the daily grind of life - that of a man who must risk his life in order to feed his family. In these poems and photographs, we see the reverberations between meaning-making and visual performance at the same time. The online as a space for creative writing delineates these two social classes. The photographs and the written texts complement each other, and as argued previously, the two elements need each other in order for the message of the poet and the photographer to be complete. In *Koroga*, the artist as the reporter is not just the poet; the photographer is also our artistic reporter.

Bolter (2001) argues that the online space is changing the way we interact. One can argue that it is also helping Africans who can afford to be online, develop richer forms of interaction because the most significant trend in African use of the digital space is the increasing use of the various multimedia forms available. Just as the Onitsha pamphleteers manipulated the print technology and the racy language of their time to capture the zeitgeist of their age, so Africa's emerging literary voices are using new media technologies of a new millennium to reflect the Africa of their generation. Kenyan and Nigerian writers are using

the power of the multimedia age to portray the life of their audience and poetry and fiction on these digital platforms are also becoming the new forms of thinking, seeing and as a way to rebel against authority. The *Koroga* project, along with them numerous videos, Facebook Notes, Tweets and blogs reflects the need to find an alternative to mainstream of ideas and literary output and this need is making the new media space an ideal platform for young Africans to present their own version of the African self and society.

In addition, poetry on YouTube or on Facebook performs the role of visual literacy for readers and viewers, in a more interactive way than the travelling theatre did across Africa in the last century. The internet as the last bastion of freedom of expression is well placed to be not just where poets and audiences interact but where they impact on one another. The poet gets to test his new ideas to see if he is actually capturing his society from the reactions of his online audience, and the reader may become more enlightened about his political rights from the poem, the poet and fellow readers. These interactions may lead to the recognition of shared ideals and possible collective actions that Barber (2007) points out as some of the most salient aspects of African orature.

For these new voices, the internet is a medium that speaks to a new possibility. Literature has always been about something new. By its very nature, literature provides an alternative to conventional wisdom, it sometimes counters mainstream values, and it often questions ordinary interpretations of reality. Tolu Ogunlesi is one of the young African poets who symbolise the marriage of new media journalism with poetry. Ogunlesi is a columnist and copy-editor for the leading privately-owned Nigerian digital media organisation 234Next.com. Tolu is an accomplished journalist who was one of the nominees for the 2009 CNN African Journalist of the Year Award; he is also an acclaimed poet, popular at many cultural events in Africa and Europe. He has a large following on both Facebook and Twitter, and he posts his journalistic works and poetry on these forums. Ogunlesi's poetry reflects my

earlier argument which suggests that the African poet is a reporter of current affairs and history. In a poem in progress *Pétrole* (1 August 2010), he pontificates on politics and the place of the poet and his poetry within it.

From pétroleuses to Halliburton,

I am the liquid ghost, starter  
of engines. And wars.

see Bayelsa. see Baghdad. Or

*Who Killed the Electric Car?*

the land is mine. the news too.

the people complain, sometimes.

but there is nothing else to do,

beyond hallucinating hazy visions

of a future without futures.

In giant ships, and leaking rigs,

I trample the waters

where once I slept

in anonymity;

a long, long way

from smothering lice eggs,

and even longer from putrefying flesh

sinking deeper and deeper

into a dark, damp  
amnesiac dust.

Ogunlesi's speaker positions the poet as a reporter of environmental pollution, which in turn is a metaphor for the pollution of the human mind by the agenda of global politics. All politics in the digital age is local, as what is happening in faraway Baghdad, in Iraq, may have a knock-on effect on what is happening in Bayelsa, Nigeria. Bolter (1991) asserts that "the computer changes the nature of writing simply by giving visual expression to our acts of conceiving and manipulating topics" (quoted in Michael Joyce, 1991). Ogunlesi's poetry, written within the terrain of hypertext, paints a vivid visual image without the poet actually adding an image or a video to the Facebook Note. The "putrefying flesh" cannot be contained within the national borders, as it will surely infect every part of the world. The metaphors of containment and diffusion speak to the condition of African poetry in the digital space, one that is no longer constrained to a fixed space as in the book age, but one whose message has the potential to reach every corner through the digital space because it is being carried by 'cloud computing.' From this poem, online readers can see the confirmation of what they may have seen on the broadcast media, read online and in the print media. Poetry in the online space strives to raise the reader's level of political and environmental consciousness.

The human condition becomes the site where the young African poet in the online space reports to work. The reader is invited to interpret the text in whichever way it suits her.

One reader Yemi Soneye, who is also a writer, said: "Palms are hitting each other for you, Mr. Pétrole" Wunmi, your startings ? killed the robots!"

Another, Wumi Mi, said: "starter of engines and wars...that would be me, not petrol. He he...."

Jide (& Tolu): my point exactly! Don't give petrol all the credit jor.”

The poet and his readers speak in a digital language, using words that combine technology-speak with the Nigerian pidgin English and native languages. You barely hear people complaining they could not understand what other people are saying. Poetry and literature in the digital age is now crafting a new language and a new dialect that is comprehensible to digital natives, but which may sound like jargon to those outside this digitalscape. And because of this development, the nature of text, its presentation and interpretations in the online space are therefore open-ended, flexible and malleable. Every interpretation, every comment and every response to comments has the potential of becoming a text or a new conversations. And every additional text reflects the possibility that more information can lead to a better world. This is arguably what we mean when those of us researching the nature of the text in online space suggest that the digital space lends itself to democratic ideals more easily than the book. The way in which readers and writers collaborate together on Facebook and other online forums suggests openness and frankness of thoughts.

Like Umez, Nwokolo, Patel, what Ogunlesi is doing in the online space suggests that although the internet is arguably an extension of the public space, emerging voices do not necessarily follow the rules of a typical literal public space as they are using internet technologies instead to devise new forms of practising their craft. Computer writer Howard Rheingold notes that “the vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled worldwide communications network is a version of technological utopianism that could be called the vision of ‘the electronic agora’” (1991: 14).

For young Kenyan and Nigerian poets, the digital space thus becomes a democratic space that allows the poet to perform without censorship and where poetry can be produced and consumed without fear, and without those taking part in this internet forum having to leave

their home or travel any distance in order to participate. Jurgen Habermas (1992 [1962]) argues that the public space is where citizens get together as equals to partake in debates and to contest the power of the interventionist and centralised state. Barber (2007) shares Habermas' view by pointing out the way in which the idea of the public sphere has been enhanced in Africa by print and media technology. African poetry in these social networking sites give poets and their audiences opportunity to express ideas and contribute to debates, regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. And this is despite the fact that at times, some of the participants do hold what may be construed as extremist views on many social issues such as homosexuality. So, we can argue that African text in the online space speaks to the possibility of a freedom of expression and the freedom to be different.

In addition, when poetry is posted on the social media platforms, it means that emerging voices are moving African literature beyond the confines of the classroom where many young Africans mostly encounter literature. They are also extending literature beyond western markets where the majority of book buyers are. A teenager in Lilongwe in Malawi, and an adult literature reader in Juba in South Sudan, do not need to spend a lot of money on poetry books they can hardly afford, when they can easily watch the YouTube video version of the poems on their mobile phones and in internet cafes. This ability to access texts at the click of a button could not have been possible in the book age.

### **Transnationalism and the idea of Home**

Many of the writers and poets who are active within the online space are often people who divide their time between the continent and the West. Some left their home countries for North America and Europe because they are frustrated with the political situation at home,

while several other writers select to spend significant amounts of time overseas for education purposes and to enhance their writing career. The gap between home and the foreign is being bridged by new media technology as it allows them to partake in activities that allow them to lay claim to an African identity. This perhaps is the condition of postcolonial migrancy in the digital age. Cyberspace can therefore be described as one of those borderlines where the global link between colony and metropolis is enacted because the internet neatly obliterates the connection to geographical or temporal locations.

If home has been cruel to many Nigerian and Kenyan writers, exile has also unleashed its own monster. Tales of racism and isolation are now beginning to emerge in some of the essays, poetry and fiction being published online. In a way, the online writing space now serves for many poets as a place for the archiving and the browsing of memory. I am thinking here of the possibility that the poems that are being posted and discussed online, and the discussions that are spurred by these activities indicate the way in which cyberspace now allows African literature a new medium to store, retrieve and negotiate collective and even individual experience of home and exile.

In an online piece for the Nigerian-owned online magazine Maple Tree Literary Supplement ([www.mtls.ca](http://www.mtls.ca)), the artist and poet Olu Oguibe, pays a moving tribute to the talented poet Esiaba Irobi, who died in exile. In the essay, he points to one of Irobi's poems "*An African Poet in England Curses his English Head of Department*" to illustrate the frustration of exile:

May your students mistake you for Caligula  
or Grendel or the Cyclops or Nero or Nebuchadnezzar  
  
Or Jack the Ripper or Richard West or Jeffrey  
  
Dahmer and deal with you accordingly...

When you bid the earth adieu, preferably  
by stoning or public strangling, may you  
be buried in the belly of a thousand wolves  
and foxes and hyenas and other scavengers.  
May vultures share your flesh shred by shred  
As they sing their national anthem in German

(<http://www.mtls.ca/issue7/writings-essay-oguibe.php>)

Oguibe then laments:

“We may have fled frustration and persecution at home, but we nonetheless both arrived in England with the mind to get through a brief period of studies and then, go back home. We had no game plan for engaging what we would later discover to be a formidable and secretive culture machine that required not simply talent or industry to broach, but tact, wily charm, and the ability to adapt easily and swiftly, also. A certain combination of resilience, persistence, and nimbleness, if you will; even a stomach for mediocrity, also. When the hope of swift return fizzled, our exile minds did not dig in like those who set out to settle would, but instead went into a second exile, Irobi for much longer than I, for, while he gave up playwriting almost entirely and refrained from trying further to place his poetry in the rightful organs of the literary mainstream, I continued to make art and to exhibit internationally, though I determinedly kept away from painting, and have yet to return fully to it. Esiaba Irobi could not adapt.” (<http://www.mtls.ca/issue7/writings-essay-oguibe.php>).



While Oguibe articulates how exile can frustrate and even kill creativity, by writing this online essay and allowing his contemporaries and readers to share his frustration, we witness the way in which the online is becoming a space for sharing the experience of exile in their capacity as poets and as writers. Cyberspace is arguably a tool for many twenty-first century African writers to define their own image and message, partially apart from those 'restrictive scripts' of the print era. Therefore, if we are reflecting on this cultural and technological shift, and what Oguibe touches upon in this essay, we can argue that the golden age of print may be ending. For many African poets, artists and writers, the potential afforded by new media technologies is a significant challenge to the hegemony of western literary culture. And this also allows emerging voices to pontificate on the experience of exile and the impact of exile on creativity. Various online discussion forums where these cosmopolitan poets use literature to navigate home and exile are one salient pointer to the digitalisation of African literature, even if they were discussing issues related to print, they are still dragging aspects of African literature into the digital space. So the online is not just a gathering point for poets and readers, but also a space that enables poetry and literature to build on work published in print and to further develop on ideas that can change the continent.

We also see that writers continue to provide a thoughtful outline, what this thesis will describe as a pseudo-Marxist sociology of African literature - where literature is being used to ask fellow Africans to bring about monumental change because Africans simply emigrating to Europe and North America may not be the solution to Africa's many problems. This persistent call for nationalistic renewal being made by writers and artists such as Oguibe is similar to the way in which a few left-leaning writers from the first generation of contemporary African writers such as Ousmane Sembene and Ngugi employed history to engage with the problems they see as facing them and their society. What Nkosi (1981: 46) sees as writers using "history as a revelation of a continuously unfolding human

consciousness in characters who are engaged in changing society or the circumstances of their life.”

Furthermore, in the age of the internet, Oguibe’s “nationalist locomotive that powers” the exiled writer’s creativity is now readily available online, as the poet can be in Africa virtually without physically being there. The advance of new media technology, whether on YouTube, I-Tunes, or the totality of the internet provides a space for the dissemination of poetry, essays and fiction, and this development speaks to the experience of exile, and also allow the poets to see what is going on back home without leaving exile. In African cyberspace, we are witnessing the deployment of the past by nationalisms, the processes of hegemonic or alternative collective memory production, conflict and post-conflict situations, place-making activities and identity construction processes. In the process, the online space becomes the site where the past, the present and the future can be analysed.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CLASS AND THE ONLINE WRITING SPACE

This chapter continues the analysis of the place of class identity in the literature that some young Nigerian and Kenyan writers are posting online, and how these works represent African literature in a new age. The objective here is to buttress the main argument of my thesis, which is that it is in the online writing space that we will be able to capture how the African self is being constructed and how class identity is being affirmed and problematized in contemporary Africa. Online poetry, short stories and essays by Nigerian and Kenyan writers are posted on the websites of big and small, local and international publishing houses, as well as on Facebook as ‘notes’, on blogs, listservs, online newspapers and online magazines. They include such well-known names like kwani.org, storymoja.co.ke, newyorker.com, nytimes.com, farafine-online.com, African-writers.com, africanwriting.com and guardian.co.uk, to name just a few.

Many of these outlets also provide an avenue for the discussion of contemporary literature, culture, tradition, current affairs and history. And it is here that writers, intellectuals, politicians and social commentators congregate daily, to look at work in progress, as well as comment on literature and Nigerian politics, arts and culture.

Martha Karge (1999) explores the idea of socialization in the online space. Globalization, she points out, has led to the rapid growth of online communities. In addition, cyberspace gives those who have the resources and capital the chance to form and make different kinds of social connections and interactions, and to build new cultures, groups and societies. An important contribution of these digital meeting places is that they enable inter-generational links and for the breaking down of barriers imposed by hierarchical and age differences - a common social trend in many African cultures. These forums are public spheres in their own

right and are also becoming spaces for joint remembering and collective examination of Nigerian, African and Diasporic traditions. They are spaces where new meanings of nationhood, freedom and friendship are explored and constructed, with potentials for historical and cultural continuity.

The idea of cyberspace and contemporary African literature is not based on vanity; there is a growing uptake of the internet and allied digital technologies such as mobile phones. As mentioned in the introduction, recent studies suggest that almost a third of the Nigerian population is online. According to a leading information technology magazine *Computer World*, Nigeria now has both the largest internet and mobile phone use in Africa as the country accounts for almost forty per cent of all internet traffic from the continent (Malakata, 10 August 2010). According to the website of Nigerian Communications Commission (<http://www.ncc.gov.ng/>) - the governmental agency responsible for digital technology - there are well over one hundred million third generation (GSM) mobile phone subscribers in the country as of August 2011. That is, almost seventy per cent of the Nigerian population has access to internet-enabled mobile devices.

This story is the same across the continent; according to Richard Wray (December 2009) a recent UN survey suggests that Africans are buying mobile phones at a world record rate, with take-up soaring by 550% in five years. Figures from various governments show almost one hundred per cent penetration in some countries, and the continent now has over 400 million subscribers - larger than in North America. In addition, an increase in mobile phone uptake seems to be having a knock-on effect on internet uptake; Facebook is now the most popular African destination on the mobile web (see Richard Wray). The 2009 report on mobile web usage also points out that there was a triple-digit percentage increase in mobile web traffic in 2008-2009. Furthermore, page views in the top 10 countries increased by

374%, unique users increased by 177%, with the amount of data transferred increasing by 183%.

However, both Ben E. Aigbokhan (2000) and the World Bank (2007)

(<http://www.uncdf.org/english/countries/nigeria/index.php>) suggest that almost half of Nigerians live in poverty and that poverty is eighty-five per cent higher in rural areas than in towns and cities. Since affordability means online accessibility, one can assume that these online Nigerian communities are not only populated by the educated class based in urban areas, but that their social formations are based on capitalist ideals, and the literature that is emerging is the product and the property of the Nigerian middle class.

### **Cyberspace as a Marker of Social Status in Contemporary Africa**

Dannah Boyd (2007) says social some networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, as well as various listserv are increasingly becoming territories where class identities are made. Dyson (1999) suggests that the internet is like a medical insurance; we all need it but only a few people in the world can afford it. With regard to much of Africa, one can argue that people with regular access to the internet are those who can afford the service – the digitally-wired, who we can refer to as being privileged and having big social and economic advantages. The South African-based internet monitoring blog IS Labs (<http://www.islabs.co.za/justinspratt/2009/07/internet-middle-class-thing>), says that internet in Africa is a middle class thing, and points out that despite the fact that South Africa is Africa's financial powerhouse, internet uptakes in Nigeria have surpassed that of South Africa. As the middle class is booming in Nigeria, Kenya and much of Africa, there are now numerous websites that cater for their taste, and online literature is arguably mirroring this.

Social networking sites of Facebook and Twitter, in addition to blogs, are becoming places where increasing number of young Africans socialise and it is here that middle

class writers and readers alike can actually partake in middle class activities without the constraint of race and ethnicity. Suffice to add that with their status as members of the global professional middle class, many young African writers are able to move between Africa, the west and the rest of the world. I want to further argue that not only do young African writers represent the duality of contemporary African culture (something which the internet has contributed to through its ability to bring people within the same professional group together, without the constraint of time and space) but that the emerging texts from these writers represent a class struggle between the minority educated urban class and the majority rural poor.

In an interview with Stephen Moss (8 June 2007) published on the London Guardian website, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie recounts how an American university professor refused to believe the characters in her first novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003):

“I was told by a professor at Johns Hopkins University that he didn't believe my first book ...because it was too familiar to him. In other words, I was writing about middle-class Africans who had cars and who weren't starving to death, and therefore to him it wasn't authentically African”

(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/jun/08/orangeprizeforfiction2007.orangeprizeforfiction> ; June 8, 2007.).

Like many of her contemporaries, Adichie justifiably wants to show the Africa that is real to her; not one of war, hunger and HIV/AIDS. "People forget that Africa is a place in which class exists... it's as if Africans are not allowed to have class, that somehow authenticity is synonymous with poverty and demands your pity and your sympathy.”

In this interview, Adichie articulates an under-theorization in postcolonial studies in African contexts of the examination of class and social formations in Africa. While there is no shortage of sociological studies on class analysis in the western world, literary analyses on class formation in the postcolonial world of Africa are few and far between. In part, this seems symptomatic of a homogenizing tendency, as expressed by that professor at John Hopkins University, who refuses to recognize class differences in African countries or that some Africans occupy an environment increasingly recognisable as middle class. But if we are to investigate modern Nigerian and African identities, being shaped and transformed by globalizing and localizing tendencies, the question of social class cannot be ignored.

In a far greater capacity than in print, the online African writer has a greater medium to assert this middle class identity and aspirations that Adichie is talking about. This possibility is further enhanced by the ability to incorporate video and photographic images into online texts; images and texts can be merged together as evidence of class, and for further affirmation of a 'real' middle class self.

In Africa, affordability means that new media technologies, apart for mobile phones, are mainly open to the middle class. In this regard, a discussion of modern African identities needs an examination of the specific multi-faceted links between the online text and the concept of class.

In this regard, I will explore how African authors are representing themselves within cyberspace both as African people and as individuals with a burgeoning self-identification as middle-class. I use this term to designate those who possess the accoutrements of the middle-class in terms of education and possession of goods and values. These three aspects come together in cyberspace where access to the technological hardware implies wealth and engagement in an online environment suggests technological capability, a particular sophistication of understanding plus the willingness to connect to a wider world than those

lower down the economic ladder. Illustrating from Nigerian examples, I will discuss how these online texts operate to consolidate the notion of a middle-class identity; how this both performs as something indigenously African and also to reach towards an international middle-class audience.

In Nigeria, as in much of the continent, social classification in the present age arguably mimics that of the West. This type of class identity started from the time when Nigerian merchants began to trade with their European counterparts along the West African coastline. Shola Adenekan (2009) suggests that this transformation also affected the local economy; there was increased urbanization, gender roles shifted and new middle-class elites schooled in European languages emerged, displacing the old elite of traditional chiefs. As colonial officers found the task of governing a country four times the size of Britain a far from easy task, they began to rely on the new African middle-classes for low-level administrative duties. Since the very first contact with European traders, the Nigerian middle-class has borrowed politically, materially and ideologically from Europe. In today's Nigeria, to be middle-class is to have similar attributes to those of the global middle classes, what Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) sees as an economic and a social status. To be educated means to be conversant in the dominant language of global trade and capital – the language and mannerisms of the World Wide Web: and the African middle-class is pre-occupied with not being left out of the internet conversation.

In an online article for [debateandreview.com](http://debateandreview.com), Meekam K. Mgbenwelu (2010) describes the current Nigerian middle-class as being “privileged to live in an information age and much more savvy at embracing the offerings of new media and new technology. They are avid enthusiasts of mobile technologies, online social networks and yearning for the social freedoms and opportunities that open, democratic and functional societies offer albeit within a Nigerian context.”



In the West, the demise of communism and Marxism in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and the increase in social mobility from working class into the professional white-collar class, were supposed to bring an end to class struggle, or at least stopped class from being a valid historical force. In Africa, however, class and social formations are now more than ever, very powerful signifiers in socio-political discourses. Wai Chee Dimock and Michael T. Gilmore in their introduction to *Rethinking Class: Literary Studies and Social Formations* (1994), argue that class is not “a merely privileged analytic category here; it is itself an analyzable artefact, itself to be scrutinized, contextualized, critiqued for its commissions and omissions” (2).

As identities are constantly constructed in time and space, the coming of the internet age allows terrain for the asserting and remaking of middle class identity. Moreover, online forums and social networking sites are becoming spaces where middle class Nigerians can assert their presence. The cyberspace allows them to escape the blanketing stereotype of poor Africans that the John Hopkins University professor seems to believe in. Online, some of these writers can just be their "real self" - Africans of middle class origin with middle class worldviews. This status in the online space is essential in showing that even the postcolonial world has different social layers. And much of the writing and thinking taking place in this digital space arguably reflects transnational conversations and modes of labour that the middle classes tend to indulge in because the cyberspace makes for a globalised lifestyle ingrained in materialism. Many of these young writers are metropolitan in their outlook, because they are probably more conversant with what is happening in African metropolis and in the western world, than in the socio-political developments of Nigerian rural areas. When they do venture into the latter, it is more as tourists rather than insiders.

In an online piece for the Lagos-based publication 234next.com, titled *Diary of a First-Timer*, we learned that when the young writer and blogger Tolu Ogunlesi visited the Oshun shrine in Oshogbo in August 2009, he entered the town, for the first time in his life, the way that a western tourist would have done. Note that Oshogbo, although not a big city, is, according to UNESCO, one of the leading cultural centres for Yoruba ethnic group. Oshun is the goddess of the sea and small children, and pilgrims often come to the annual festival from the Yoruba and African Diaspora, notably from the Atlantic world (see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1118>). Here is Ogunlesi's narration of his cultural experience:

“I arrive Oshogbo about 8am on Friday August 14. The cab driver drops me off where I can get a motorbike to the festival. “Tell them you’re going to ojubo,” he says. “It can’t be more than fifty naira!” It turns out to be more than fifty naira. Twice that, actually. Perhaps the okada rider has seen through my hurriedly assumed air of knowledge; my backpack and camera case have convinced him I am an ‘outsider’” (<http://234next.com/csp/cms/sites/Next/ArtsandCulture/5446813-147/story.csp>).

Ogunlesi is a Nigerian; he speaks fluent Yoruba but the drivers and bicycle riders of Oshogbo knew immediately he is not one of them. Here, the middle class African and son of a top Nigerian psychiatrist, realises, he has more in common with a metropolitan western tourist, who is more likely to be of the same social status as he is, than with ordinary Nigerians of the town he is visiting.

Sensing that the writer may not actually be in touch with the reality on the ground, a reader responded: “Good work Tolu, nice reading. Did you get to interview any of the major people? Oshun has an extremely rich culture you may be interested in...”

In her online blog post for her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie acknowledges the dilemma facing this generation of middle class children:

“Cultures evolve and things change, of course. What is worrisome is not that we have all learned to think in English, but that our education devalues our culture, that we are not taught to write Igbo and that middle-class parents don't much care that their children do not speak their native languages or have a sense of their history”

(<http://www.halfofayellowsun.com/content.php?page=tsbtb&n=5&f=2>).

As identity keeps changing in time and space, people like Ogunlesi and Adichie can fit into multiple relationships and several subject positions, and as Doering (2008) suggests, “there are two opposing trends: a striving for belonging (feeling similar) and a striving for distinction (feeling separate).”

Adichie’s sentiment is also shared by a leading member of the Nigerian political class Chief Olu Falae, who in an interview with Duro Adeseko (26 September 2009) in the Nigerian leading tabloid *Sun News Online*, highlights how far removed a new generation of middle class Nigerians are from tradition:

“It is common to see people in the middle class and those in the upper class discussing the future of their children. The in-thing among the elite in Nigeria is to train their children abroad. Those in the middle class who are unable to afford training their children outside Nigeria don’t usually take their children born in the city to their villages. Many children of the elite who were born and trained in the city don’t know the road to their villages.”

(<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/TalkNigeria/message/88592>).

Meekam K. Mgbenwelu also describes the Nigerian middle class as:

“Many of those marching in Nigerian cities and in far flung cities of London, New York etc are drawn together by a common bond. They are educated, unlike their parents who came from rural areas, their formative experiences were forged in urban areas with the attendant cosmopolitan tastes and values that come from city life.”

What these statements suggest is that the idea of the middle class African writer as the African cultural ambassador rather problematic. The middle class African writers may only be able to fully represent members of her own class as she may be a little ignorant of the way people outside her social setting live. So if we view contemporary Africa wholly true her worldview, we may end up with the African writer as a “fraud.”

Krishnaswamy (2005) aptly asks us to investigate “what exactly are the ‘missing bits’” to which these cosmopolitan writers must reconcile themselves. The metropolitan perception of the contemporary African texts is problematized by the presentation of the cosmopolitan writer as the mouthpiece of African culture. These writers in turn, often play the role of the ultimate insider-outsider to an outside world that is often too willing to accept them in such a role. As Sherif Hetatta argues in *Dollarization, Fragmentation, and God* (1998), there has been a tendency by this group of people "to think and declare that they represent the people in the South better than the people themselves can do it, because of the sophistication, the means, and the knowledge at their disposal" (The Culture of Globalization, 290).

Since literature has long been a source of anthropological evidence, instead of us fully accepting that every member of a new generation of African writers represent the total postcolonial experience of every African, we probably need to see that their experience is that of middle class Africans, which may not be representative of those with little or no education. The reality within which new creative works are produced and consumed, needs to be queried, in order for us to not ascribe responsibilities to young African writers which they may not be able to live up to. Thus, the public persona of the twenty-first century writer as an autonomous conveyor of African realities, and as the true teller of the African story, may be as wrong as it is problematic.

On the World Wide Web, Nigerian writers are asserting their middle class values through fictional narratives. Cybertexts are bringing the Nigerian and African middle classes to the notice of many outsiders, who may not have encountered the 'real' Africa before. This is in addition to bringing the continent's culture to those readers who may have only encountered Africa through the limited visage of print and television media. Through their literature, we are seeing what they perceive as normal African ways of life. In that 'normality' they are sometimes seem to be trying to free themselves from the baggage of chaos and diseases which mainstream western media have long associated with Africa.

Class is not just about how people position themselves in terms of a particular social level, which is often determined by occupational identity, but about how identities can be seen in terms of one's shifting relationship and self-distancing from others through conscious and unconscious choices. Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor (2009) suggest that spatial immobility is just as significant as mobility in the making of personal identities.

In order to further highlight the way that the online writing space allows for the making and the asserting of a middle class identity, we can look at the online musing of the 2005 Caine Prize winner, SA Afolabi, who in a blog post [The Tufiakwa Syndrome](#). (Sunday, 7 September 2008) alludes to the fact that the physical space that is Nigeria and even the Diasporic Nigerian space, are too conservative. He complains about the expectation to conform to societal values and norm.

"And when people do fail to meet up, they become topic of our side talk, something for us to look at with condemning awe. It is remarkable how Nigerian communities even in different parts of the world continue to live by or even create rules, values and moral obligations that sometimes streamline them. And this communal action of creating sets of values also take form in young people setting up these expectations around themselves that they must meet in order to gain some kind of respect "

(<http://afolabi-pieceofmind.blogspot.com/2008/09/tufiakwa-syndrome.html>).

Afolabi was born in Kaduna, Nigeria, and grew up in various countries, including the Congo, Canada, East Germany and Indonesia. He was working for the BBC prior to winning the Caine Prize (see Michelle Pauli, 6 July 2005). For people like Afolabi, cyberspace makes for the creation of an authentic identity, one that is enshrined in 'global' middle class values, of which individuality is an important aspect. This space also allows the twenty-first century middle class Africa to be able to interact every minute of every day, closer than ever before, with people of similar social status from across the world.

Afolabi craves individuality and rejects the communality that is enshrined in traditional Nigerian space. He suggests "that individuality and nationalism are so opposing, and can be

likened to oil and water," and believes that communality and nationality compromises the self. The cyberspace liberates the self from these physical space demands. In the online writing space, the young Nigerian can escape all the negativities that come with the physical African space such as the media images of rampant poverty, war and famine - and at the same time frees himself from the burden of societal expectations. Afolabi articulates this further:

"Sometimes, I feel that if life in Nigeria was to be likened to a novel, people, that I love and claim to love me, would become antagonistic to me, not for some intrinsic vileness in them, but for the reason that my core contradicts their beliefs and convictions. Yes, this might be the reason why I find the need to use the colloquial "Tufiakwa" to allude to our reaction to anything different, the reason why I feel torn between being the 'true Nigerian' or being my true self."

The online writing space represents the true Afolabi in a way that the physical space may not, since he had to leave that physical space in order to realise his true self. The individual freedom that the World Wide Web provides is one that is arguably grounded in materialism – which is materialism as espoused by middle class cybertexts. Cyberspace liberates the self from these physical space's demands. In the online writing space, these young Africans can escape all the negativities that come with the physical African space such as the media images of rampant poverty, war and famine - and at the same time frees himself from the burden of societal expectations.

Many young African writers in the online space are very mobile with connections that extend to various parts of the globe in addition to the daily connection to the outside world that the internet enables. Their lives embody the phenomenon of postcolonial migrancy with the internet neatly obliterating the connection to geographical or temporal locations. The online

thus becomes a space in which the African author can appeal to his or her audience using a discourse of similarity in relation to their western middle-class counterparts.

### **Online Fictional Characters as Embodying Real-life Class Struggle**

Like Afolabi and Ogunlesi, the 2007 Orange Prize winning writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, is of strong middle class background. Adichie is the daughter of a former university vice-chancellor and a university registrar. She was born and raised in Nsukka, a university town and most of her life has been surrounded by academics and people in the professional class. In fact, she was raised in Chinua Achebe's former house on the University of Nigeria campus (see [William Skidelsky](#), 5 April 2009). Adichie's online short stories, like her award-winning novels, often deal with the changing circumstances of the Nigerian middle class, from the early post independent years to the present time.

Adichie's work provides an excellent insight into the representation of middle and lower classes in Africa by several writers from strong middle class background. Interestingly, Adichie has been cited as articulating the African postcolonial experience. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur foundation in conferring its 2008 Genius Award on her, notes that "she is widely appreciated for her stark yet balanced depiction of events in in the post-colonial era." (See <http://www.macfound.org/site/c.1kLXJ8MQKrH/b.4536885/> ) To the outside world, she is a cultural ambassador not only for Nigeria, but for Africa. So, how do her online works back up this representational role?

One common trend in Adichie's fictions and writings from other voices from her generation is the relationship between the middle class and the lower class. Emerging voices may rebuke the stereotypical portrayal of Africa by westerners, but their own representation of the poor in



Africa is equally problematic. Just as Westerners often portray Africans as poor and naïve, lower class characters in many online short stories are often portrayed as dirty, ignorant, unwashed, archaic and bucolic. The poor in online fiction are often pictured in childlike posture, forever reliant on the benevolence of the African middle class and at worst a menace to modernity and civilized sensitivity.

In Adichie's "Life During Wartime"

([http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/06/12/060612fa\\_fact3](http://www.newyorker.com/archive/2006/06/12/060612fa_fact3) June 12, 2006; accessed July 13, 2009), we are given an insight into the world of middle class Nigerians and their domestic servants – a middle class world not too different from that of Adichie's. The narrator describes it as "the flower-filled compound in Nsukka - the dusty, serene university town in eastern Nigeria." Fide the houseboy from the village is described as someone who "has never seen a refrigerator. He was light-skinned, and his lips were so thick and wide they took up most of his face. He spoke a rural dialect of Igbo that was not Anglicized, like ours, and he chewed rice with his mouth open - you could see the soggy like old cereal, until he swallowed. When he answered the phone, he said, 'Hold on,' as we had taught him to, but then dropped the receiver back on the cradle. He washed our clothes in metal basins, and pegged them on the line tied from the mango to the guava tree in the back yard" (1).

The characterization of Fide also reveals a class-based pathologizing of the Nigerian poor personhood. In this story, we see the division of labour between the lower class Nigerian and his middle class boss, something which the professional middle class is not often willing to acknowledge; Fide does all the dirty work in the household, while the university lecturer performs the creative role. Yes, both classes must work for a living, but it is the middle classes who enjoy what they do, and it is the poor who clean their houses and babysit their

children. The poor must submit to the will of the Nigerian middle class person – this is the big man versus the little man phenomenon at play here.

In a fashion similar to many parts of the globe, African writers as the postcolonial recorders of history and as reporters of unfolding events, represent a division of labour – thinkers not labourers. And as it has been argued previously in this chapter, while the former have a strong voice online, there is no visible voice for the poor inhabiting the country's urban and rural landscapes. Many young writers in the digital age also double as intellectuals, and they can be regarded as the people whom Stuart Hall (1996) describes as “the deeply cultural character of the revolution of our times” (232). Through their creative writing, they become the creators and the disseminators of most widely-accepted ideas. Barbara Ehrenreich (1990) aptly points out that almost every discourse that find their way into the cultural mainstream emanates from a small group of highly-educated people – writers and intellectuals. She also argues that “these people are paid to provide the ‘spin’, the verbal wrap that gives coherence to events or serves to justify arrangements we might otherwise be inclined to question” (6-7).

In addition, since education, money and class are the only keys to having a voice in much of postcolonial Africa as well as in Africa's cyberspace, the labourers are totally excluded from serious conversation about contemporary culture and political life. Instead, the gaze, like the conversation, goes one-way; from the middle classes come the interpretation of culture and tradition, without the conversation returning from the other side. In the short stories discussed above, we see that the university is the breeding ground for middle class ideas. Like most of their contemporaries, the works of Adichie, Cole and Afolabi often revolve around the lives of Nigerian academics, as the university and the intellectual are two of the most common features of the contemporary Nigerian literature. From the print to the cyberspace, Nigerians texts have focused a lot of their attention on intellectuals and the campus environment from which they operate from. The online and the university both represent spaces where Nigerian-

ness and middle class consciousness are regularly produced. There is something about the labour these spaces perform in creating and shaping innovative modes of African-ness in creative writing, and as spaces of the most familiar and the unexpected. From Achebe to Adichie, for half a century Nigerian writers keep returning to these spaces in really fascinating inter- and cross-generational ways. The internet therefore shows how ideas and gazes rarely go the other way in both physical and virtual spaces of Africa. Just as in the real world of newspapers, academic journals and news magazines, these cybertexts which this chapter has analysed show how cyberspace is probably becoming a place of exclusion and alienation for those not connected to the information superhighway.

While western proponents of the end of class such as Bell and Hollows (2005) may argue that life styling as seen in their popular media is an indication of the end of social group and the rise in social mobility, such representations of Africa – by Africans - have often denigrated lower class taste as well as traditional African values and systems. The negative depiction of Fide is a sharp contrast to that of the delinquent middle class son of a university professor Nnamabia, in *The Thing Around Your Neck: Cell One* (26 June 2009) – “Nnamabia looked just like my mother, with that honey-fair complexion, large eyes, and a generous mouth that curved perfectly. When my mother took us to the market, traders would call out, ‘Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and the leave the girl so dark? What is a boy doing with all this beauty?’ And my mother would chuckle, as though she took a mischievous and joyful responsibility for Nnamabia’s good looks.”

The fictional figure of Fide, the houseboy, also emerges in real a life situation at a lecture given by Adichie for the influential technology organisation TED. In *The Danger of a Single Story* (October 2009). In this online video lecture, the writer tells us how she encountered and fought the African single story in the United States of America: she talks about the girl she

shared university accommodation with whilst studying in America who was surprised that she could speak English at all; another fellow student who asked for African tribal music and who was shocked when the writer gave her a Mariah Carey audio tape instead.

And there was the houseboy called Fide in Adichie's own household back in Nigeria, whom everybody regarded as poor and worthless. Adichie narrates the difference in status between her and the real life Fide – her family's houseboy:

“I come from a conventional middle-class family ... and so we had, as was the norm, live-in domestic help who would often come from nearby rural villages; so the year I turned eight we got a new houseboy - his name was Fide. The only thing that my mother told us about him was that his family was very poor.”

Adichie is not only making a clear class distinction between her family and other, rural, poor families, in this particular lecture she criticises her eight year old self for only seeing their new houseboy as poor (although this is predicated on the only information supplied by her mother), a ‘single story of poverty’ that is apparently exploded during a visit to the boy's family home. Here, his mother:

showed [them] a beautifully patterned basket made of dyed raffia that his brother had made; [she] was startled. It had not occurred to [her] that anyone in his family could actually make something.

Adichie's comments do not clarify precisely what the new plural story might be, beyond recognising that it moves her from mere pity. However, the revelation that Fide's brother is a craftsman keeps him firmly relegated to a class below the middle. While Adichie is trying to

warn her western audiences not to believe everything they read, hear and watch about Africa, she is at the same time trying too hard in framing her identity around a middle class identity, which those she is lecturing can recognise. She thinks her humanity can only be confirmed by referencing only all that is bourgeois and not the so-called "tribal music" and her own Igbo oral heritage. Moreover, by portraying the likes of Fide in a bad light, some of these writers are arguably trying to dissociate themselves from the majority, and from the negative image of Africa. In attacking both western portrayal of Africa and Africa's political corruption and its inherent widespread poverty, the middle class writer may have good intentions, but the narratives we get border on reactionary interpretation, and as an imitation of the way the western media often portray their own underclass as well as people from developing countries.

The houseboy has become a regular prop to middle class African lifestyle in the same way that the single story about Africa is helping the west display the supposed superiority of its own civilisation. In addition, the houseboy has been a feature of writers writing about Africa, be it European or African. The African writer loathes what the trope of houseboy has come to embody in the European imagination - that is, a metaphor for Africa. For example, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's short story *The Martyr*, published as part of the collection *Secret Lives and Other Stories* (1974), uses the trope of the houseboy to instigate racialised class warfare against colonial capitalism and western liberalism. The story's protagonist is Njoroge and her employer is a liberal European settler in Kenya named Mrs Hill. Njoroge loathes Mrs Hill's liberalism, which he deems as hypocrisy since she sees herself as racially superior to Africans. Here, Ngugi uses the houseboy as a representing the way European colonizers saw Africans as being racially inferior to Europeans.

Taban Lo Liyong (2005 [1969]) in *The Last World* argues that "Africans have been mad at

expatriates for taking the African houseboy as the representative African...” (quoted in G.A Heron’s introduction to Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino & Song of Ocol*, pg 13, 1984).

Ironically, those who are mad are middle class African writers who do not like what the houseboy has come to signify – naiveté, foolishness and the ability to willingly accept European servitude. But the characterization of the houseboy and poor people like Fide in the hands of some middle class African writers in the online writing space has not been much different from the way in which European writers have been portraying Africans.

In the physical space of Africa, people in the domestic servitude’s economic bracket represent the majority, but the have-nots are missing in cyberspace. And some emerging voices’ treatment of the poor speaks to the dynamic class warfare. And so, this pathologizing of lower class fictional characters shows a means of re-affirming class difference. The two characters of different socio-economic backgrounds may both be light-skinned – a depiction that is in itself problematic – but it is the middle class Nnamabia, who has the good looks, love and care. Fide, on the other hand, appears uncouth and unable to cope with modern life.

Adichie also highlights how she was greatly influenced by the white characters she read about when she was young, by writing about snow and people with blond eyes and blue eyes, when she first took to creative writing. She says she herself bought into the single story phenomenon when she was young, blaming the books that were available to her when she was a youngster. Since Adichie was born in 1977, one can say that the problem is not the western books, but the problem was Adichie's own fixation with westerners. By the early 1980s, there are already hundreds novels of various genres already written by not only Nigerians, but by writers from all over Africa and its Diaspora.

In *Sierra Leone, 1997* (2006), Adichie tries to lay bare the effect of political corruption on those on the lower rung of the economic ladder. She tries to challenge the middle class’ attitude toward their servants, but at the end of the story, it was the poor Fide who paid the

ultimate price by dying in the Sierra Leonean civil war, as a soldier of the peace-keeping Nigerian Army, while the middle class family's lifestyle continues uninterrupted by all the instability around it. The mother accepts the houseboy as "our own Fide" only after his death. Thus it was through death that the poor manage to lay claim to their humanity.

Just as the older generations used the print to attack the European imagination, emerging African voices want to use the online writing space to attack the malaise of the single story. In the same Guardian interview, Adichie laments that the single story "...simplifies Africa. If you follow the media you'd think that everybody in Africa was starving to death, and that's not the case; so it's important to engage with the other Africa." She finds the coverage by global media powerhouse such as the CNN "exhausting because of its refusal to let Africans do the talking" (Stephen Moss, 2007).

Adichie is right to attack the Africa in the John Hopkins professor's imagination. As she said in the TED lecture, it is the single story that assaults the African consciousness. However, given the stridency of Adichie and her contemporaries in denouncing the West for stereotyping Africans in these "single stories," it seems that they are quite simply guilty of eating their cake and demanding it back. One detects a certain issue with identity; this aching to be seen as anything other than what we really are, the need for middle class affirmation. Some of it is understandable; that is, the resentment that some of these middle class writers feel, but they are either doing a poor job of articulating cohesive arguments against western portrayals of Africa, or they are merely being hypocritical, since they keep receiving endowments from the same western institutions they are verbally attacking.

If Adichie's online work captures the current chasm between the urban middle class and the rural poor, Teju Cole's online short story *Modern Girls* (21 January 2008), gives us an insight into the world that the current generation of middle class Nigerians was born into - the world

of their parents. The narrator is a pupil at an upmarket boarding school, which is based in a rural part of western Nigeria; the sort of school started by the colonial government to educate the locals who will take over the administration of Nigeria after independence. The small town of Omu where the Royal College for Girls is situated serves as a metaphor for class divide. We were told that before the school came into being it "consisted of a few small farms, a cluster of mud houses with thin roofs, a creek, a chieftain. The people of Omu were mostly Muslims, which meant they were not part of the cultural elite"(<http://qarrtsiluni.com/tag/teju-cole/>: 2).

For the most part, colonial education was geared at raising Africans who will think and behave like European missionaries; the disdain that European had for those elements that denote Africa, such as tradition and Islam were traits inherited from European educators, and traits which have survived until today. In *Modern Girls*, we see how the middle class has learnt to hate rural people like "Nuratu", one of the small numbers of rural dwellers lucky enough to make it into The Royal College for Girls. The narrator informs us that these students from the village "had to be good - at least by the standard of their villages and hamlets - but often clear that they weren't the usual Royal College material." (<http://qarrtsiluni.com/tag/teju-cole/>; 2) Their clothes were not only scruffier, but they could not speak English like the Europeans and instead pronounced "ch" with a Yoruba accented "sh".

Nuratu, the epitome of African tradition and provinciality also "laughs like a goat," has not mastered "Dryden" and eats boiled yams like a market woman. The Nuratu that the narrator gives us seem incapable of cultural development due to her traditional Yoruba upbringing. In short, to use the word of the narrator, she is "local". (<http://qarrtsiluni.com/tag/teju-cole/>; 1). This, cybertext reveals the means and ways through which the Nigerian middle class, in its quest for western bourgeois lifestyle, has internalized the colonial hatred of those elements



that are seen as authentically African.

The educated African fears the return to his supposedly savage past and in the process is determined to "keep the forest at bay" and has mastered "Livy and Cicero, learned how to set silverware on a formal table, mastered the expansion of polynomials."

(<http://qarrtsiluni.com/tag/teju-cole/>; 3) Thus, Nuratu, in the midst of these middle class girls, became a symbol of backwardness and savagery. And because she does not have a Christian background, it was easy for her middle class classmates to accuse her of bringing juju into the hallowed ground of Royal College because they believe she lives close to the forest.

In examining the state of mind of the middle class African, these new writers lampoon their fellow middle class citizens as mimics. But while they may have exposed the false terrain of the fellow middle classes, their own treatment of lower class characters is questionable. In *The Thing Around Your Neck*, the narrator admits the injustice of class by acknowledging that instead of blaming their thieving children, the university professors at Nsukka will rather "moan about riffraff from town coming onto their scared campus to steal". However, rarely do these riffraff receive justice. Instead, the focus quickly returns to middle class lifestyle, with the poor serving as mere backdrops to the story.

Rural dwellers as the ambassadors of African authenticity have become the bogey people of contemporary African life, notably in cyberspace, and especially for a middle class that's been trying for years to rescue Africa's "negative" exotic and naive image from the likes of Nuratu. But while the middle class African writer preaches Africanism ad nauseam, it is people like Nuratu who remain at the bottom of the African narrative well.

Education has become the most potent way through which African tradition and ways of life can be totally devalued. Mrs Allardyce, the British schoolmistress in *Modern Girls* has no qualm in blaming Nuratu's Africanness and wonders "We have entirely failed to free these

girls of the pagan spirit" (<http://qarrtsiluni.com/tag/teju-cole/>; 4). Africa has served as reference point for western self-definition and in order to do this, Africa's way of life, cultures and behaviour are taken out of context so that they appear unreal, alien and with no historical foundation. Not only is the African devalued, the Western has essentially imposed itself as the norm, and the 'pagan' African way othered. Since the balance of power tilts toward those who see themselves as normal, it is no surprise that the narrator informs us that one of the Christian girls later rose to become the vice chancellor of the Ogun State University. This reflects the consistent effort by middle class African writers to privilege the western over the traditional African ways of life, and to show that different destinies await the rich and the poor, workers and thinkers.

The university campus is the incubator of the professional middle class and online literature's portrayal of the characters that inhabit the Ivory Tower in Africa offers us the ways and means through which lower class people have been devalued in relation to middle class identities constructed by old and new media. As Sherif Hetata (1998) argues, the quest for materialism acquired through western-style education has led to an Africa where the allure of bourgeois lifestyle is forcing most to look up to the west in reference. Moreover, by looking at the class struggle between the protagonist and Nuratu, we see how young middle class African writers are being forced to reassess their own humanity, especially before a global audience in cyberspace.

Romance and courtship are other popular trends in online fictions. From literature to Nollywood, these are familiar themes in contemporary Nigerian culture. And there is a heightened engagement with the issues of romance, intimacy and sex, in the freer virtual landscape that is the internet. In this regard, the Nigerian and the African middle classes have borrowed heavily from the West, especially in terms of online literature's idealization of the

concept of "one man, one wife". Jennie Wang (1997: 70-71) argues that the real historical objective of the western institution of marriage from the seventeenth century, is the domestication of the lower classes by Europe's ruling classes, and at the same time to render impotent its agitating middle classes.

In the twenty-first century Africa, as both the internet and literature are purely middle class affairs, the concept of the institution of marriage as posited by many middle class writers, has become a political tool through which the worldview of a powerful minority in contemporary African society is championed. The construction of man-woman relationship along the line of western-style nuclear family is an expression of a bourgeois middle class normality, which the internet champions through its many discourses, and it is not the traditional African view of polygamous marriage or the extended family institution.

Local and western media are playing a great role in imposing western perception of love and romance on Africa. The internet along with Nollywood movies, are intensifying the sentiment of bourgeois romance as representing contemporary Africa. In several online short stories and poems, we see the way in which the consumer culture has come to define the Nigerian middle class. Materialism not only determines relationships and love, it is also an essential part of the African middle class culture, and this in turn is crowding out all other cultural possibilities in contemporary Nigeria as highlighted by many of these emerging cybertexts. These new works in the online space indicate how class as lived in Europe and America has historically influenced middle class Africans, and this representation is being carried over into the digital age. This bourgeois romantic ideal is not only a foreign concept that is fast becoming localized, middle class Nigerians are active agents in its adoption and acculturation because they see western-style romance as the cure for some of contemporary Africa's social malaise. The internet and its literature are geared towards individualism not collectivism. In many online texts, the tranquillity of the man-wife relationship is often disrupted by the extended

family and when relatives such as cousins and aunts are discussed they are often relegated to such unsavoury roles as uneducated houseboys and village gossip. Relatives are also often portrayed as alien to the culture of modernity which the protagonists are well versed in. This tendency to privilege the modern points to a belief that western civilization is the only saving grace for the modern African society.

While young writers may want to lambaste the negative stereotyping of Africans by a section of the western media, their creative desire for a globalized lifestyle based on western practices indicates a tension with their opposition to the western attitude towards Africa.

Their interpretations of love and sexuality are embedded in the structure laid down by the globalized capitalist system and western rhetoric. The exclusivity of the internet means that the traditional African view of love and romance is being obscured and voices of millions of economically-disadvantaged lovers are not heard, but what we get instead are localized version of romance, based on the need of western capitalism and political pursuit.

In a blog post for the New York Review of Books, Tim Parks (February 2010) warns of the danger of “the dull new global fictions,” which he blames on the forces of globalisation – money and the internet. Parks remarks that “as a result of rapidly accelerating globalization we are moving toward a world market for literature. There is a growing sense that for an author to be considered ‘great,’ he or she must be an international rather than a national phenomenon.”

So when some of the young writers complain that western critics deride their fictional characters as been inauthentic, it is because those critics see too much of themselves in what are supposedly "African texts". In the quest to attract wider readership and win international awards the language that some of the emerging African literary voices employ in their craft may be becoming universalised. Femi Osofisan (2008) one of the leading lights of the generation before Adichie, articulates this imposition when he points out that “Our aspiring

writers, children of the new age of globalization, are inevitably obliged to comply with the ethos of modern Euro-America, if they are to find willing publishers and sell their books, for the local outlets are sparse and miserably incompetent, miserably unprofitable” (70).

The online writing space now seems to have the potential of making the middle class African experience a mere replica of the West. For example, the narrator in *The Thing Around Your Neck: Cell one*, reminds us that she and her siblings have read Enid Blyton as children and their breakfast is more western cereal than the local breakfast delicacy Akamu. She also points out that "Nsukka campus was such a small place - the houses sitting side by side on tree-lined streets, separated only by low hedges..."

The world she describes could have been Cambridge, Massachusetts, or Cambridge, England, not the image of Africa that the western critic is used to. That universalization of the middle class experience in online short stories speaks to the bourgeois lifestyle that middle class African parents and grandparents have copied from Europeans. Family life is often depicted not on the traditional polygamous family but on the western-style nuclear family. At the core of this bourgeois domestic ideal stands "Daddy" and "Mummy" - the good father and mother, the perfect breadwinner and homemaker respectively. Emerging online texts are suggesting that polygamy is for backward Africans, while those with aspiration are choosing the western type of family unit. Lola Shoneyin (20 March 2010), another leading member of the new generation of African writers, who is coincidentally, the daughter-in-law of Wole Soyinka, hints at this in her piece for [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk): "The sad truth is, polygamy constitutes a national embarrassment in any country that fantasises about progress and development." The legacy of Christianity and westernization has impacted on the characterization of modern Nigerian society, including family life. For some of these new contemporary voices, western bourgeois domesticity is more the norm than an aberration, with the nuclear family as the main medium

for the physical and social reproduction of middle class stratum.

Furthermore, in some of the online literature we can argue that when middle class characters manage to venture into places where the poor live, they arrive as slum gazers. The narrator in Teju Cole's *modern girl* recalls Omu as being located in "the middle of nowhere" with "men who were covered with dust... The men were dark and thin, and they had bodies made muscular by hard long manual labor" (<http://qarrtsiluni.com/tag/teju-cole/>). These middle class girls are like slum tourists in "freshly-starched blue and white check blouses, dark pinafores" who watch the men work. In emerging fictions, we are able to see through the gaze of the domestic slum gazer-we who live next to, across from, and traffic through slums. And how both gazes interact, intersect, bisect, and teach each other.

Emerging online texts also show that it is through these encounters with the members of the lower class that the children of the middle class come into contact with their own history. The lower classes are the mirror through which we see how the majority of Nigerians live. And since middle class children have little or no contact with their parents' rural roots, it is often the domestic helps who educated middle class kids about their tradition in the way that Fide brought folk tales, the traditional oral text of the lower classes, to the narrator in Adichie's *Sierra Leone, 1997*.

Due to the normative tendency of the internet, many online African fictions are bourgeoisie texts in both their aspiration and crafting. At the same time, they give us an insight into class struggle, and the middle class writers' struggle with their own social identity and their place in the physical space of Africa. The ideas they espouse about Africa are those of globalised yearning, and even when they rebel as in Adichie laying claim to her middle class identity, it is often within the framework of capitalism. And by laying claim to European Christian

values and bourgeois aspiration, they are constructing the idea that the African can only know himself by imitating the west. And as Ngugi (1997) posits, the price these writers are paying is the loss of African culture to Eurocentric conception of Africanness as well as “the self-mutilation of the mind... and the misplacement of values of national and personal liberation” (29). The conscious (and some unconscious) pathologizing of tradition and values in favour of Euro-centric concepts of modernisation speaks to the continuing disorientation of Africa, especially its middle classes. On the other hand, these new voices are also pointing out the hypocrisy of their own class. In *The Thing Around Your Neck: Cell One* (2008), we learn that it is the children of these upper middle class Nigerians who are responsible for the frequent burglary and cultist mayhem on the university campus, but their parents chose to blame these incidents on poor people from outside.

Meanwhile, other emerging voices in the online writing space recognise the potential pitfall of cultural representation in the online space. The artist and intellectual Olu Oguibe (2002: 175-177) recognises how this claim of cultural representation can become a big problem in the light of the digital divide between the haves and the have-nots: “we have also come to acknowledge that a gulf has emerged between those who belong within the network and are thus able to partake of its numerous advantages, and those who are unable to fulfil the conditionality of connectivity...information gathered on the Net becomes our readiest access to other cultures and sections of society as it inveigles us in the lazy preoccupation of going through its own portals of voices and information for our knowledge of the unconnected.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### FROM WOLE SOYINKA TO SHAILJA PATEL: QUEER SEXUAL POLITICS IN A NEW MEDIA AGE

In the two previous chapters, I argued that class is emerging as one of the major themes in the literature that is being published online by some of the emerging African voices. In the remaining chapters, I will be analysing sexual politics and the representations of marginalised bodies enmeshed within the politics of sex, because the online writing space allows many young middle class Kenyan and Nigerian writers the opportunity to look at taboo sexual subjects, and they often use their status as cultural ambassadors to do this. Furthermore, I want to analyse how middle class writers continue to be a powerful constituency - a group that serves as the gatekeeper of modern African history. This is because when we look at sexual politics in many countries across the continent, we consistently see writers as key players. In the next two chapters, this thesis will be showing how authors in the print age started the contextualisation of the gay African as a figure of modernity and its moral corruption, rather than a figure that predates modernity. Some of the important literary figures of the last century positioned same-sex desire as part of the sexual excesses that some urban Africans copied from the West, or as a trend that colonial rule brought to Africa. For some of the new writers in the online space, the figure of the homosexual African is no longer being used as a body that literature deploys in the project of talking back to the West or in the project of nation building; rather, writers and intellectuals alike in the digital age are pointing to this figure as being part of African history and as being vital to its future. I will be showing how the online space as a new tool of globalisation is helping to articulate this difference in agenda between the previous generation and the emerging literary voices.



In Sahilja Patel's online courtroom drama, *Last Word: Caught in the Act* (8 March 2010), published on the blog Kenya Imagine ([www.kenyaimagine.com](http://www.kenyaimagine.com)), the prosecutor, who is also the protagonist makes a poignant statement before the court as he presents the Ugandan government's case against ten citizens accused of sodomy, by proclaiming that "I further present Exhibits E, F, G and H, found in bags of defendants. Books promoting homosexuality by William Shakespeare, James Baldwin, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Wole Soyinka, Dennis Brutus."

Patel is not just using Soyinka, Baldwin, Brutus and Appiah as mere backdrops, the protagonist's statement foregrounds the way in which some of the earlier literary works envision the way in which non-totally-heterosexual bodies are affected by politics. What we witness therefore is the intricate link between the process of the homosexualization of African literature in the second half of the twentieth century, and the queering of that space in the twenty-first century. These literary figures represent for the prosecutor, the corruption of the African society, from within and outside of the continent. His statement maps the battle over queer African's body. So, a close reading of some of the online fictions and poetry of this 30-something Kenyan Asian writer, reveals not just a literary recognition of the debt that the internet generation owes the first generation of modern African writers, but the way in which the 'no gay in Africa' debate has shifted to a more confrontational representation by writers because of the digital space.

I make the above comparison because I want to use Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1966), not just as my point of departure but to use them to articulate the way in which homosexual subjects within various mappings of nation and Diaspora are now being represented in the digital age, and to show the way in which the emerging voices' approach is changing from that of the generations before. An analysis of texts published in print and in cyberspace can provide us with the starting point that one

hundred per cent non-straight Africans are arguably central to literary understanding of African politics, because as a response to that politics, literature has to continuously look at shifting sexual meanings and erotic choices. My argument is that what has changed, however, is a growing vocalisation of support for gay rights, within and outside of literature by emerging voices.

In addition, I also want to argue that both *The Interpreters* and *Our Sister Killjoy* began the problematization of African homosexuality as belonging to the margins of the African text, from the pre-colonial era to the age of colonial modernity. Homosexuality, I want to argue, has existed before the advent of European rule, but that oral texts have largely placed it as secondary to heterosexuality, with only intermittent recognition by history. What some of the emerging texts now provide is a more direct challenge to history by affirming that homosexuality belongs to the mainstream and not the periphery of both historical and urban discourse.

Both Sissie, the protagonist in *Our Sister Killjoy*, and the book's author Aidoo, provide us with good examples of this literature's earlier reluctance to support gay rights on the continent, despite the intelligent reading that the book gives on African queer identity. Or how can one explain the fact that Sissie represses the memory of her German lesbian lover Marija, while cherishing that of an old African boyfriend? Sissie's cold treatment of Marija, despite the emotion and the physical effort that Marija invested in their short affair during Sissie's stay in Germany, cannot just be blamed on racial and cultural differences, but on the writer's intervention in pointing out the futility of same-sex desire for an African, thereby forcing Sissie into what Adrienne Rich (1980) terms as "compulsory heterosexuality". Moreover, Aidoo, the writer, acknowledges this intervention by proclaiming that:

"...if you let loose an African girl in Europe, she is bound to come across all sorts of

experiences, enriching, demoralizing, - ah – positive, negative, etc. It was one experience that this girl, as a character came across” (see Miriam C. Gyimah, 2007).

Aidoo’s suggestion is that Sissie’s lesbian experience can be related to the moral corruption of an African girl in Europe and not to the fact that the girl may have had same-sex desire back in Africa. Aidoo’s statement on Sissie reveals the role that authorial intervention plays in some of the print literature which deals with homosexual representation. She reveals an agenda and this statement helps map out the different path that some members of the young generation of African writers have taken on this issue in the digital space.

Like Aidoo in *Our Sister Killjoy*, Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965) speculates on homosexuality through the lens of race, capital and politics. But while the lesbianism of Sissie takes place in a foreign land, thus assigning a foreign space to homosexuality, queer representation in *The Interpreters* takes place in Nigeria. What is poignant however, is that the novel's only openly gay character Joe Golder, is a foreigner - an African American, who teaches African history at a Nigerian university and whom the narrator clearly wants us to know as an "American and three-quarter white" (101).

Unlike Aidoo, Soyinka may have not publicly pronounced homosexuality as alien to Africa (given his close friendship with Kwame Anthony Appiah who is openly gay); the novel itself leaves the impression that it is. By stressing the fact that Golder is an American who is not one hundred per cent Black, the narrator is trying to tell us that homosexuality can only come not just from the west but also from bodies that are not authentically Black. Golder’s white heritage marks him as a potential site for homosexuality and perhaps if he had been one hundred per cent African American, he would not have been homosexual.

When Golder poses for a portrait, his Nigerian artist friend Kola, decides to mould him in the form of a Yoruba animal spirit Erinle, rather than more revered gods like Ogun, which Kola asks Egbo (a Nigerian member of this group of intellectuals) to pose as. One can read this as Soyinka using Golder's European lineage as site of turning the racist gaze back to the West; Golder is part European, so his status befits that of an animal. Homosexuality is likewise demeaned and diminished by the writer ascribing this low status to Golder. Furthermore, not only is an important character like Golder a marginal figure in the novel when compared to the book's other characters, but the narrator highlights Golder's American-ness rather than his diasporic link to Africa; in the process, Golder becomes what Homi Bhabha describes as the compulsory hybridity of the colonized. (See Neville Hoad, 2007). But marginal or not, just as Aidoo queered every aspect of Sissie in the Bavaria (in fact the narrator gives us a more nuanced insight into African homosexuality than what the dismissive view of Aidoo would suggest); Soyinka queers every aspect of Golder in Lagos. He even indulges in fetishizing of this queerness so much so that he tells us that "when Joe Golder was ugly, he went the full range of transformation...And he was being ugly from pique, self-despising as always...Kola, even before he began his canvas on the Pantheon, had remarked how well he would translate into one of the gods" (102).

On the other hand, we can see that both Aidoo and Soyinka are two of the pioneering modern African writers to first articulate the marginal position of homosexual subjects within various mappings of nation and Diaspora, something which a new generation is now building upon through cyberspace. Therefore, it is important to note that these writers' own agenda in ascribing foreignness to homosexuality does not diminish the relevance of queer readings which these texts provide African literature. Then, if that is so, we need to ask why did the

older generation refuse to clearly acknowledge the Africanness of homosexuality, the way the younger generation of writers now does? What has changed over the past four to five decades?

Now, let us compare Aidoo's stance to that of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whose only representation of African homosexuality takes place in an online short story for *Granta* (which in 2009, became part of a collection of short stories in a book format *Jumping Monkey Hill* (2006). In a CNN's *African Voices* video interview (CNN African Voices, 13 July 2009), Adichie says:

"The reality is there are gay people who are human beings in Nigeria and I want to tell their stories". In another interview for the Nigerian daily *Thisday* (13 May 2007), she says: "Perhaps as part of my reaction to the gross hypocrisy around sexuality in our country... I am interested in writing about [sex] in the most upfront and demystifying way."

The Kenyan writer Stephen Derwent Partington in an email conversation on the Concerned Kenyan Writer listserv, on November 29, 2010, shares Adichie's sentiment:

"There is a part of me that feels that arguing for gay rights and acceptance of gayness in Kenya is a brave and still necessary thing in itself; but that a more effective strategy is to argue how it affects us all. My citizenship is threatened when gays are threatened, and the rights of everyone I love, and everyone I share a national space with and don't always like but at least respect; and so, listen to their voices... There is no productive society that can be formed from the voices of the privileged alone; they are the set-upon who will show us all, including those of us who have forgotten what

it means to be set-upon, that freedom for all only comes when those wrongly condemned as lepers have taken their full place, and have shown us the horrors of their experience of being condemned.”

These statements signify a change in tactic in African literature’s long interest in national politics; some fifty years after independence, the postcolonial state is riddled with rampant corruption and in its bid to maintain its hold on the public, the political class in coalition with many religious clerics are trying to seize the moral high ground by attacking the increasing visibility of African homosexuality in the digital age as a sign of moral corruption. Now, the agenda of literature is no longer just about exposing politicians' corrupt antics, but to also challenge the hypocrisy and lies surrounding sexuality by focusing on hidden and marginalised bodies, who continue to haunt African history. This is possible because at the moment, queer fictions and essays can easily and cheaply be published online, where there is no intervention from the big book publishers whose bottom line is the profit margin (from textbook sales to satisfying African shareholders). In addition, the digital space is largely free of governmental intervention in most African countries.

Apart from what was written in literature, traditional media outlets on the continent such as television, radio and films, have mostly covered heterosexual relationships. Television stations across the continent are mostly controlled by the government and rich private individuals and are often subjected to censorship by the government, the same is through of radio ownership in Nigeria and Kenya. Because homosexuality is judged to be un-African by most African political and religious leaders, these two mediums rarely carry plays and dramas that challenge heteronormativity. In addition, one rarely sees gay and lesbian characters in most of the thousands of plays and soap operas that Africa’s most popular film industry

Nollywood, produces every year. These Nigerian films are very popular in many African countries because they are cheap and easily accessible to the poor. I have seen them shown on buses that poor people use in Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria.

The traditional travel theatre that preceded the now booming video industry in much of Africa was mostly based on heteronormative ideals, and most of the productions that came out of that era (from the late 1940s to early 1990s) mostly contained heterosexual subjects and characters. For example, the plays of Hubert Ogunde and Oyin Adejobi in Nigeria mostly reflected heterosexual identities. African films pioneers such as Ousmane Sembene, Duro Ladipo and Hubert Ogunde arguably used their creative productions to articulate Africa's emergence from colonialism, by privileging African heterosexual tradition over anything else. Like the novels of Aidoo and Soyinka, these early film and theatre legends were fixated with showing the world that Africa has a history and that Africans are part of the civilised world, and so sexuality in films and plays is employed so as to emphasise Africa's humanity.

Therefore, images from traditional media have defined what it means to be a man and the role of women within the African space. Many of these films, dramas and soap operas often look at African sexuality through the discourse of polygamy versus that of monogamy; and modern concept of love versus the traditional view of romance and relationship. For most Africans, these traditional media outlets are spaces where heterosexual identity is defined and reinforced, and those with identities that do not fit in with what is considered as the sexual norm, such as lesbians, gays and transgendered people cannot find any representation of their sexuality in the broadcast media. Like the print media, the traditional broadcast media is a space which maintains what Judith Butler (1999) refers to as the "heterosexual matrix".

I also want to argue that the agenda of book publishing is different from that of online publishing; writers are human beings and like every other human endeavour, book publishing

has its own politics. Such politics before the advent of the internet suggested that Africans do not do homosexuality, so books on African homosexuality will not sell because it might not meet readers' expectation of what is African literature and because various African governments might ban homosexual texts from being used as part of the school curriculum. This politics is articulated in Adichie's online story, *Jumping Monkey Hill* (<http://www.granta.com/Magazine/95/Jumping-Monkey-Hill/Page-3>, autumn 2006). In this piece, a young female Senegalese lesbian writer reads a work in progress to a group of international writers at an African writer conference in South Africa. And at the end of her reading, the host, a genial figure in the literary world, declares to the rest of the group that homosexual stories are not a reflection of the real Africa, "How African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?" This statement arguably sums up attitude to the theme of African homosexuality in the world of book publishing. The Senegalese writer bursts into tears, arguing that this is her African story: "I am Senegalese! I am Senegalese!"

The narrative in *Jumping Monkey* suggests that some publishers of African literature do not necessarily see same-sex fiction as being relevant to the African condition. However, in this new media space, there is now a growing appeal for academic and literary materials on same-sex fictional narratives that will be published online. There is a queer African literature group on Facebook and several African literature groups on Facebook and other social networks seeking same-sex fiction and poetry. In a blog request for new literary works on homosexual life in Kenya, posted on the blog Potashke (26 January 2009), its editors wrote:

"We lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex individuals, in a word, queers, have had the distinct un-pleasure of being told we don't exist—in official government statements, historical documents, and contemporary statements. Well, we do. We want



Kenyan stories by Kenya-based and Kenya-born queers. About everything. We want writing about the dailyness of our lives, the good, the bad, the weird, the indifferent. If you have lived it, we want to hear about it. We especially want to reach beyond Nairobi, Mombasa, and other cities to all corners of the country. And we know the rest of Kenya, Africa, and the world wants to hear these stories as well."

(<http://potashke.blogspot.com/2009/01/writing-queer-kenya.html>).

The same sentiment is echoed by the South African queer activist, writer and photographer Zanele Muholi, who blogs at <http://www.zanelemuholi.com>. She articulates this new agenda in an online photographic exhibition titled *Faces and Phases*:

"In the face of all the challenges our community encounters daily, I embarked on a journey of visual activism to ensure that there is black queer visibility. *Faces and Phases* is about our histories and the struggles that we face. Faces express the person, and Phases signify the transition from one stage of sexuality or gender expression and experience to another. Faces is also about the face-to-face confrontation between myself as the photographer/activist and the many lesbians, women and transmen I have interacted with from different places. ...The viewer is invited to contemplate questions such as: what does an African lesbian look like? Is there a lesbian aesthetic or do we express our gendered, racialised and classed selves in rich and diverse ways? Is this lesbian more 'authentic' than that lesbian because she wears a tie and the other does not? Is this a man or a woman? Is this a transman? Can you identify a rape survivor by the clothes she wears?"

(<http://www.michaelstevenson.com/contemporary/exhibitions/muholi/facesphases.htm>).

These pronouncements within the online writing space provide a good insight into the thinking and the *modus operandi* of a new generation of Africans, with the capability to bypass official and unofficial censorship because of the digital age. It can be argued that more and more members of this generation now want to query the twenty-first century postcolonial state through what another young Kenyan writer Evan Mwangi (2009), describes as “Africa writes back to self”, by bringing to the fore the theme of homosexuality and queer identity in Africa to Africans in the online space. Many of these new works take up the discourse of homosexuality by blatantly using literature and arts to quickly respond to politics. In the online writing space, young authors are finding the voice not only to write openly about homosexuality, they are also marketing these works as queer literature.

One can ascribe this development not just to the freedom that the digital space provides, but also to the openness with which young people from across the world now talk about their sexuality. By bringing the private into the open, one can argue that these writers/bloggers are envisioning transparency as being ethical. In an article for *Wired* magazine (arguably the social networking bible), Facebook's founder Mark Zuckerberg, is reported to have articulated the social networking generation's attitude to privacy; that by openly acknowledging who they are and behaving consistently among all their friends, they will build a more transparent world, and that young people will become more responsible and be ready for the consequence of their actions (see David Kirkpatrick, August 2010).

Another explanation for the change in approach is that both *Our Sister Killjoy* (1966) and *The Interpreters* (1965) came about as part of the 1960s' era Pan-African project of decolonizing the Black/African body, while currently emerging fictions and poetry are part of the growing online African literary works that are questioning the supposedly un-Africanness of homosexuality. For example, when in *The Interpreters*, we are taken into the dream of the journalist Sagoe, we see Sir Derin, the politician, revealing himself as a cross-dresser in brassieres belonging to Dehinwa, who happens to be Sagoe's real life girlfriend (Dehinwa is a Yoruba name meaning 'come from behind'). His coming out as a cross-dresser symbolises a betrayal of a nationalistic cause rooted in African masculinity for a British knighthood. Sir Derin tells us: "I got my knighthood. That is why I keep the brassiere on" (65). In his bid to seek the favour of the recently departed colonial masters - the British - Sir Derin decides to devalue African masculinity and he becomes corrupted by western capital.

In the second half of *Our Sister Killjoy*, Sissie not only banishes the memory of Marija, but she ends up devoting energy to urging educated Africans who are trying to accommodate Europe's racism, to return back 'home' so that they can develop Africa. With this fixation on privileging African masculinity (read as responsibility) over femininity (which of course can be read as recklessness and betrayal), one can argue that these fictions are preoccupied with liberating the African body from colonial hang-ups, so as to enable the post-independence effort of nation building through the discourse of Black power and African solidarity.

With this decolonialization agenda, queer rights and sexual explicitness are arguably considered frivolous until now. Femi Osofisan (2008) argues that up to the present millennium, the gaze of African literature has mostly been fixed on writing back to the west

through the creation of heroic figures; fictional characters who are too busy querying the ‘white man’ and “constructing a nation out of the debris of colonialism”(65). He goes on to explain that:

“What I’m saying is that the vacancy in our previous literature of the sensual and the erotic, this absence that now seems astonishing to us, had its roots in the conditioning manners of its genesis, and as well in the extant laws of public morality and of creative practice ” (Outlier Vol 1, 2008).

In addition, Osofisan argues that many writers had a colonial (Victorian era) type of education, and that literary training in university until recent years, means sexual explicitness is avoided in most creative writings. Osofisan perhaps accurately articulates this dilemma; even when Aidoo writes about love between Sissie and her German lover Marija Sommer, it is with a Victorian era’s style and grace:

"So there was a great deal of hand-holding, wet-kissing along ancient cobbled corridors. Pensive stares at the silvery eddies of the river" (41).

Not for Aidoo the graphic details that we see in some of Patel’s online poems, such as this excerpt from the poem *This Is How It Feels* (2008):

“when you go down on me  
wind blows fragrant  
through my garden  
from your hungry lips  
earthquake tilts my pelvis

chalice for your sips  
your tongue a hot wet finger  
separates my libia..."

(Outlier, Vol 1. 2008).

These lines would have made *Our Sister Killjoy's* Sissie blush! Not only is lovemaking out in the open, but the love that dares not speak or come out two decades ago is now erotically provocative, very talkative and likewise political. While Sissie, the protagonist in *Our Sister Killjoy*, tries to reject her lover by instinctively slapping Marija the first time they try to make love, the speaker in Patel's poem is savouring the pleasure of making love to a woman. Sissie's lesbian romance is mostly carried out in secrecy; in cyberspace, queer private romance becomes a tool for political activism in the public space of Facebook and Twitter. And the reason for this provocative and audacious development is that for those writers who want to represent queer desire, the internet offers the ultimate medium for same-sex erotic writing. For some of these emerging voices in the digital space, queer writings speak the language of rebellion against authority.

Osofisan (2008) captures this argument when he says: "No area of sexual practice or perversion is considered sacred any more, it seems, to the writer's garrulous tongue. It is almost as if the younger writers, later-day Jean Genets, are motivated by a volition for shock and outrage, for deliberate wounding" (69).

Some of these short stories being published online and the agenda of their writers show that African literature in cyberspace can constitute a reliable basis for analysing sexual politics. As argued in the first chapter, new media technologies continue to give writers new avenues

to shape, recreate, possess, re-live, experience, remember forgotten old cultural practices and create new contemporary cultural values. Patel's poetical explicitness on the theme of sex also offers a reprise to the openness with which some ancient African poems and arts depicted the theme of sex. To show how some ancient Africans and contemporary grassroots people did and did not see sex as a subject of taboo and how they still discuss sex and sexuality in the open, Osofisan (2008) translates a poem song at the annual Oke Ibadan festival in Ibadan, Nigeria. This 'Ijala' (a sub-genre form of traditional Yoruba poetry) talks about the punishment that the penis often inflicts on the virginal, with women singing that the sweet-pain of the penis during the night meant they can hardly get any sleep. What Osofisan is arguably trying to do here is to debunk the myth that Africans do not naturally have an affinity towards the obscene and that the sexually explicit texts that we are now seeing in fiction and poetry in the digital age represent the poetic licence that poets in many African societies have been enjoying for many centuries. After all, there is a saying among the Yoruba people that "*Ọba kii pa ọkunrin*" meaning, the king does not kill (prosecute) a poet/singer.

In addition, these online writings suggest that we need to rethink the way citizens engage with politics, by literary theory taking into consideration the way in which literature depicts those small-scale, everyday political engagements, which are based on fluid locations rather than a status of citizenship conferred by the modern state. An engaged citizen in the online space, Heike Doering (2008) argues, is likely to become better engaged in the offline world. Cyberspace, in the process, becomes a site of political movements, and this element is arguably as relevant as those formed in the physical space.

Before I go further, I need to warn that it is very easy to romanticize most young writers as

dreamy-eyed idealists resting only on homo-friendly lawns. The internet, of course, is also a tool for African conservatism. Some members of this new generation do not support gay rights and see queer writings (literature, essay and journalism) as another sign of neo-colonialism. The Nigerian writer Matthew M. Umokoro, argues that such discussion “will amount to giving a tacit recognition to the existence of this aberrant group... The giddy technological height attained by the so-called developed world has resulted in the disintegration of their traditional society and the breakdown of family life” (Umukoro, 2009).

In Kenya, similar view is expressed by the writer Barrack Muluka (9 January 2009) in a blog post for the Nairobi-based [standard.co.ke](http://standard.co.ke). In the piece, Homosexuality Perversion is a Threat to Survival of Humankind, he argues that:

“For I have always considered the homosexual a pervert, who should be left alone. And I have left these nauseous fellows alone. But this is to the extent that they leave you alone. Today, homos whom we thought were normal men and whom, therefore, we respected are obliquely (and sometimes quite overtly) pronouncing their status and trying to make society feel guilty about its aversion to homosexuality”

(<http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/columnists/InsidePage.php?id=2000000590&cid=489&>).

It is also important to stress that various studies such as Saskia Wieringa (2008), Hoad (2007) Azodo & Eke (2007) and Amadiume (1987), have warned us not to misread these old practices as privileging homosexuality over heterosexuality or as giving them equal status. Rather, they suggest that same-sex relations were allowed within a heterosexual marriage model. These scholars that I have just mentioned are arguably right. In my own study, I

examined the corpus of Ifa of Yoruba people. In this religious text, we see a strong acknowledgement of people who are not one hundred percent heterosexual in two of his chapters - Ìwòrì-wòfín and Ìwòrìwòdí. However, these religious poems privilege heterosexuality over same-sex intercourse by pointing out that diseases do arise from such sexual encounter. In addition, a version of Yoruba mythology of human creation suggests that the deity of Ifa Orunmila was a product of a sexual relationship between two women and that is why Orunmila had no bone in his body because he was a product of an ‘unholy’ union.

Therefore, we can see that a close reading of some oral African texts as well some of the earlier work of modern African literature backs up Foucault’s (1981) argument that homosexuality exists in every culture. In *Our Sister Killjoy*, the protagonist Sissie recounts the story of a European headmistress in colonial Guinea. The woman came to Africa to devote her life to “educating and straightening out African girls” (66), and is horrified to find two of her female students in bed together. Shocked that sodomy actually takes place in Africa, the headmistress gasps:

“Good Heavens, girl!

Is your mother bush?

...Is your father bush?..

Then, why Are You Bush?” (66).

Homosexuals and sodomy not only exist in Europe, they exist in Guinea, this colonial outpost of France. The two pupils, instead of being petrified can only “giggle” at the headmistress’ outburst. So, in this excerpt, lesbianism becomes a zone of competing values; that scene set in the girls’ boarding school is amazing for the way it contrasts “bush” and “civilized” sexualities and thinks of sexuality as a zone of competing epistemologies. Aidoo helps initiate



a smarter reading of African homosexuality in the continent's modern literature because *Our Sister Killjoy* foregrounds the current argument of some members of the internet generation that homosexuality is probably not un-African, rather, it is perhaps homophobia which is alien to pre-colonial Africa.

In the digital age, Patel's gays and lesbians are also everywhere; in books, on cyberspace and even in the minds of the ruling classes; they are accused of being responsible for all the ills of the society because of their increasing visibility and presence. The prosecutor laments:

"It is the gays who drive our poverty and unemployment.

The gays who created war in Northern Uganda.

They blocked the peace process.

They spread HIV.

They destroy families.

The gays destroyed our chances in the African Cup of Nations.

Niger and Benin know how to keep their players undefiled and strong."

So, what Patel and some of her contemporaries are now doing in cyberspace is building on same-sex African history.

Doering (2008) argues that the digital space is becoming a site for shared awareness of one's history and of one's place in the community. A consciousness of some of the forgotten African traditions can be reprised in cyberspace and may be turned into everyday action, for creating a shared future. One can therefore see some of the online queer fictions and poems, as speaking to a lost era, or building on and reprising the activities of that era, as nostalgia is used to reinforce an African belonging.

For a new generation of writers and theorists, Nyeck (2008) argues that the term "African queer" is an aberration, in that it speaks to an impossibility, while "supposedly chasing an emptiness" (6). That quest to make an impossible desire possible is embodied by the openly

bisexual young Kenyan writer and blogger, Potashke, who declares “I do not write. I protest.” (<http://potashke.blogspot.com/2010/05/political-writing-in-my-kenya.html> ). He informs us in a previous post that through writing about Kenya on the internet, the monopoly of ‘truth’ has shifted because young writers do not necessarily have to rely on big publishers and media outlets. He says “you already said that I cannot say Fuck and Orgasm. So I am wondering what the FUCK I am meant to read out for the intellectual stimulation of your staid audience...”(<http://potashke.blogspot.com/2007/07/unplugged.html>).

In a 2009 interview with Poefrika blog (15 May 2009), Shailja Patel affirms that:

"Silence. I've always been called to break silences – silences of history, silences within families or communities or countries. I always notice whose voices and stories are not being heard in a particular space. My mission as a poet is to make any platform I'm offered larger for all silenced and marginalised voices...Politics is essentially about power – who has it, how they wield it, who doesn't. Two quotes sum up the role it plays in my writing" (<http://poefrika.blogspot.com/2009/05/1.html>).

These and many other similar statements suggest that many of these writers strongly believe in political literature and in the role that poetic, fictional and personal narratives can play in the way African literature and writers react to sexual politics. Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe (2000) argue that the internet can be seen as a site of changing understandings of identity and literacy, with political and personal consequences.

## **The African Queer as Anti-Capitalist Cyborg**

Another example of this new agenda is seen in the way in which the digital space allows for the outing of Africa's fluid identity. Being Kenyan Asian and pro-queer, Patel represents the way in which, in this new cultural space, identities are becoming blurred and fluid. The internet domain speaks many different languages, and it is a site in which different traditions are merging together and thus representing a 'new' African metropolitenity.

Patel informs us in her seminal work, the poem *Migritude*: “They never said / they loved us/those words were not / in any language / spoken by my parents. 1975 / fifteen Kenyan shillings to the British pound / my mother speaks battle. Love is a luxury / priced in hard currency / ringed by tariff” (Phanuel Akubueze Egejuru, 14 May 2009). Patel lays claim to an African identity despite being of Asian origin by saying “I coined the word *Migritude* as a play on *Negritude* and *Migrant Attitude*” (Poefrika.blogspot.com, May 2009).

Patel in cyberspace and in the offline space becomes a border-crosser not only because she represents postcolonial migrancy but also she intersects the boundary between heterosexuality and queerness. She is the postcolonial figure who has learnt to move seamlessly within various cultural spaces, speaking in diverse languages (Kiswahili, Gujarati, English and Gikuyu), and “surviving by interweaving and juxtaposing ideas, literary forms and linguistic styles.” Thus the troublemaker, the queer and the mongrel – the post-postmodern subjects - now occupy the queered African space and we are seeing them in online literature.

While Patel may not necessarily be accepted as authentically African by some people within and outside of the continent because of her Asian background, her texts and proclamations, however, speak to the silence of these unseen African identities, and she represents the

avocation and the emergence of these marginalised traditions. Himani Bannerji (1995) asserts this politics of identity (which the digital space enhances) allow people like Patel a chance of naming themselves. Patel's offline and online relationship with Kenya and the West (where she often travels), speaks to the migratory tendency of many of today's African writers, and the mobility and the hybridity, across multiple online and offline platforms, for which African texts have been known dating back to decades before the era of trans-Atlantic slave trade. Patel and her works therefore reflect complex geographies of belonging and alienation, in addition to the problematic politics of recognition and invisibility, synonymous with queers. (See Mary Bryson et al). This is perhaps where the term 'queer' is apt for those Africans who do not fit into the gender binary and identities, acceptable to the postcolonial state.

Like most of these emerging African voices, many of the characters and narratives studied in this chapter are based on the professional middle classes and their lifestyle. For example, the central figures in fictional and true stories that are analysed in this chapter are members of the educated class in Nigeria, Kenya and the rest of the continent. So, as in the texts examined in the previous chapter, the voices of African queerness in cyberspace are predominantly middle class, and their representation in literature has largely mirrored this group. However, these online works are also challenging the agenda of wanton materialism that we often associate with the middle classes in general. Two of Patel's online poems for Outliers - *This Is How It Feels* (2008), and *Two Girls* (2008) - both use sexual pleasure to make a statement against hetero-normative capital. We see this in *This Is How It Feels* (2008):

"let it give

Pat Robertson

Dr Laura

screaming slaving  
wet dream nightmares  
here between my legs"  
(Outlier, 2008).

Here, we see that in cyberspace, queer pleasure and same-sex desire can also be subversive. So, queer intimacy is not mere sexual lust; it is militant in its desire. And like the neo-conservative American televangelist Pat Robertson, epitomizes unbridled capitalism and religious fundamentalism, we can see that in cyberspace, queer African desire can sometime be a disservice to capitalism. From this particular angle, some of the emerging online African writings are showing the way in which the new media technologies that tether us to capital and control can also work to resist these tendencies. Through their mobile and active connections, some of these young Africans are creating a public sphere where individuals and groups can express and enlighten, collaborate and organize.

The speaker in *This is How It Feels* (2008) also informs us that:

“it’s true we really do  
change the world  
by f\*\*king yes  
the revolution  
is our naked bodies  
woman’s mouth  
on woman’s cunt woman’s lips  
in woman’s labia woman’s tongue”  
(Shailja Patel in Outlier, 2008).

Middle class text, although an agent of capital, is also now rebelling against the physical space's demand on the African person to have a family and be in a relationship with the opposite sex. These cybertexts show that outside of hetero-normative desire, gays and lesbians see their bodies as beautiful, desirable and loving. Thus queer sexual desire is not only about pleasure; it is equally fulfilling and meaningful. In the digital space, lesbian sex also serves as a commentary on a history of subjugation of queer identity, and cyberspace's freedom from real-life sexual bondage.

The Nigerian poet, scholar and gay-rights activist Unoma Azuah, is also one of the leading lights of the new generation. Her poems and fiction have been used in academic discussions on queer identity in Africa, and she edited the digital publication in which some of Shailja Patel's queer poems were published. Azuah's online poem for Sentinel Online Magazine, *Home is Where the Heart Hurts* (2005), captures the anguish of an Africa lesbian Christian. The lamentation of the speaker can be heard in these lines:

“My life is of gazes at metal crosses  
the thorns and blood that was Christ's lot  
I live to partake of the one thorn ripping through  
a clear flesh  
in the communion that is a flash  
in a pan of bread and wine.  
The tolling bell calls  
to sleep, waking, baking, prayers in  
beads of blunted edges  
it calls to vows, reunions, knots and strings of  
dangling hopes.” (<http://www.sentinelpoetry.org.uk/magonline0305/page15.html>)

Within the space that is African Christianity, there is nothing but tears and sorrow for the non-straight Christian. The speaker in the poem longs to partake in the rituals of her religion, but her sexuality becomes a barrier, since heterosexual union is the only recognised lifestyle. The speaker tells us that she is the unacknowledged spectre hunting the Church as well as African history:

“There is no name for our game  
its identity is stuffed like torn papers in the cracks of caves  
My lover and I  
are eunuchs on the corridors of echoes  
the sterility of crosses, silence, prayers and mortality.”

The church and Africa are spaces where memories are smouldered and killed; where homosexual desire cannot be expressed but must be bottled up and neutered. The queer figure within these spaces is therefore a eunuch parading the corridor of history. The anguish that the lesbian speaker is experiencing is then described as similar to what Jesus Christ went through. Christ as an asexual figure; Christ as the revolutionary fighting history and sexual longing. And because Christ won the battle of ideas, the lesbian figure tells us that she is going to be defiant:

“After a long trek in the desert of life  
My lover is a festival of meals  
We have devoured love and made lust  
the aroma that hangs in our kitchen.  
I bore my lover like news delivered  
to a keen receiver

the message and the messenger merge  
in nights of sweat and fear  
it's either the heat of the tropics or  
the steam of love lost and found.”

What Azuah wrote here would probably not have been accepted by many book publishers in Nigeria and Kenya who will fear incurring the wrath of the Church and the state. Patel and Azuah's erotic poems fit in with the argument of Giddens (1992), who points out that sex in cyberspace now speaks the language of revolution. And Haraway (1995) argues that there is a link between revolutionary standpoints and identities. These plays and poetry from two of Africa's talented emerging voices therefore show the way in which an imaginative piece of literature can be employed in the online writing space as a site for querying history, for the analysis and for the re-examination of contemporary attitude to behaviours that do not conform to societal norms. Haraway uses the term 'cyborg' to describe people like Patel, Azuah and their fictional characters. She points out that these figures prefer the politics of “personal communicative freedom” and “strategic political mobilizations” (see Carlson, 2001), to a rather subtle politics of Aidoo and Soyinka, which relies on an expectation of reform. These fictional characters' encounter with those in authority within cyberspace, and the way in which Patel and Azuah are challenging the Church and the political establishment in the real space of Africa, underline the way in which spaces acquire meanings through our interactions with them. What African literature is doing in the online space is therefore as important as the advocacy work that the writers of these poetry and fiction are doing in the offline space.

Additionally, we see that through literature, the internet is now becoming the gathering point of desires and dreams for contemporary Africa; an archive of unseen pleasures and pains; a free space for marginalised bodies; and a performative site of contestation and contradiction.



Ross (2005) argues that the interaction on the World Wide Web is liberating, as under the guise of anonymity users can adopt identities that suit their current need. African literature in the online writing space reflects the way in which the internet provides an escape from social and sexual conventions that human beings may encounter in the physical space. So in the process, intimacy and relationship are quickly and easily formed.

Speakers in poetry and characters in fictional narratives are arguably depicting the life that some real life gay Africans lead. They arguably symbolize the experience of African queerness and the queering of the African space. So, these role-playing activities that are becoming available in literature in cyberspace can allow real-life queer Africans to explore different aspects of their sexual identity in a way that is impossible in the 'real' world. For example, if fictional queer characters are coming out online or are gathering at a certain online space, real life lesbians may want to explore these avenues and imitate fictional characters. James Weinrich (1997) studies queer communities and the online space; he argues that the internet may have benefited this community the most, in that people who are unsure about their sexuality can experiment and experience a new sexuality from a safe distance of different online gay communities before deciding to 'come out' in the real world.

This argument is being made because in pre-internet years, there are probably no openly gay meeting points for many queer Africans in the same way as in the West. So for the Ugandan defendants arrested in a cybercafé in *Caught in the Act*, the internet is perhaps playing a critical role as the site of African queer culture and as the space for nurturing libidinal, romantic, social and political investments against state-sponsored homophobia. In addition, with a growing number of blogs, essays, short stories and other online literatures, written by Africans for fellow Africans within and outside the continent, many real life queer Africans

can now partake in activities that they can easily identify with, such as the latest gay fashion, literature and other issues of interest that fit into their African identity and tradition. In addition, these digital queers can use the digital space to forge global solidarity against rabid homophobia in the offline space.

The Nigerian writer and blogger Chude Jidenonwo, in a blog post for the Lagos-based new media publishers 234next.com (January 4, 2010), highlights how the Nigerian queer culture is one that is emerging from the fringe of the society because of the internet:

“Even celebrities play a huge role: at parties and in magazines, the list of 'alleged' gay celebrities have included A-list musicians, actors and TV presenters. Some names are repeated so frequently that, just like with Hollywood.com and PerezHilton.com, everyone seems to know who's gay and who's not.”

Jidenonwo further points out that social networking sites particularly Facebook are providing “the ultimate opportunity for gay expression.” This revelation shows that online interactions may be bringing about a new kind of openness, which is touching many facets of contemporary life in many African countries.

While the people that Jidenonwo mentioned in this article may be hiding their faces from the online public by using different usernames and fake profiles on these social networking websites, writers like Patel and Potashke (the name ‘Potashke’ itself is a blogging nom-de-plume!) are becoming the public face of African queers in both cyberspace and in the physical space. They are unofficial cultural ambassadors and their literature speaks on behalf of millions of queer Africans. William Simon (1996) points to this as a new way of seeing, and as an opportunity for debating or thinking aloud about an unseen world.

Massaquoi (2008) enjoins us to look at the connection between the continent's political history and the relationship of all queered bodies to this history. The private, of course is political, and just as there is a political agenda in *Our Sister Killjoy* and *The Interpreters*, so the play *Caught in the Act*, reflects the agenda of the political class in stoking up homophobia in order to gain favour from the larger public. In this online drama, all the dialogues come from the prosecutor, who serves as a metaphor for the male authority figure in postcolonial African politics. He reads out the charges against the defendant as:

“Conspiracy to engage in homosexuality

Promoting homosexuality

Promoting-aggravated-homosexuality

Attempted-aggravated-homosexuality..”

( <http://www.kenyaimagine.com/67-International-Affairs/Social-Issues/Caught-in-the-Act.html> ).

From the prosecutor, we hear the rhetoric against homosexuality as he reiterates the point that same-sex desire equals violence. The prosecution of the defendants for exploring homosexual desire on the internet reveals the way in which the persecution of the sexual other is used to serve as an example of the consequence of crossing the line between what the authority deems as the 'normal' and the 'abnormal'. The trial serves as a warning to all dissident figures in Uganda. Cross the line against the government and you will be hunted down, even in cyberspace. The prosecutor also provides a testament to the vital between the process of criminalizing and the stating of what is sexually wrong when he intones before the court:

"Your Honour, this case is clear cut.

Not all dissidents are gay. But all gays are dissidents.

All sodomites are criminals. But not all criminals are sodomites.

Not all terrorists are homosexuals. But all homosexuals are terrorists.

All human rights people are not of Gomorrah. But all sodomites take shelter under the tree of human rights“...

By linking the defendants' homosexuality to prostitution and paedophilia, the prosecutor as a symbol of patriarchal authority is showing us the way in which the law is perhaps now being used to paint homosexuals as deserving their marginal status, because they are a menace to the society in the eyes of those in position of power. This is thus a way of not only reinforcing what is considered the norm but the legal means of excluding and punishing those bodies that are deemed as opposite to the 'traditional' African ways of life. The prosecutor's actions demonstrate fully and dangerously that within the postcolonial state, the struggle over queer rights is fundamentally a struggle about human rights. And that claims for cultural diversity, so often used by many African politicians, are claims that challenge the very idea of human rights by asserting the privilege of culture or national sovereignty over the idea of the human. Both the personal and the sexual become political, and those in control of national politics and religious organisations are proclaiming that their homophobic utterances represent the view of the people. It is here that sexuality can be linked to the notion of citizenship (see Neville Hoad; 2007). So, we can deduce that the process of non-recognition impacts on the concept of citizenship, be it online or offline.

Foucault (1981) argues that modern social life is influenced by the rise of disciplinary power, which could be controlled and regulated (quoted in Giddens, 1992). In his view, modern society has managed to enforce discipline through institutions like the school, the church and the military. In the process, the body becomes docile and obedient to authorities. Foucault thus sees sexuality in terms of power dynamic and control, with the African cyberspace

representing the site from which the 'other' or the 'abnormal' can strategically hope to free herself of the societal norm. But while Foucault thinks that the “emergence” or “appearance” of the homosexual body or homosexual-like person is central to human histories and the scope of human sexuality, those who see themselves as the norm in both the online and offline spaces, see the homosexual African as a disease, an inauthentic person who is merely an agent of westernization.

Furthermore, Ross (2005) sees the online writing space as a place for power struggle, or even a titling of power in favour of the young, with the dynamic against those who define sexual normality. While in the offline space, the subject of homosexuality may be a taboo and the expression of same-sex desire a criminal offence, cyberspace allows these Ugandans to re-scale, re-territorialize and re-orientate their African and Uganda identity away from the nation-state because their online activities put at risk the Ugandan government's current position as the predominant political community. As Doering (2008) argues, the digital space has the potential of remodelling the concept of citizenship, such that it is no longer determined just by the state but by multiple forms of engagement and belongings. The crackdown that we see in *Caught in the Act* (2008) depicts this fear; the powers-that-be are beginning to see the subversive power of the internet. Therefore, by imposing criminality on homosexuals and by authorizing homophobia, the authority may succeed in driving gays and lesbians who have come out in cyberspace, back into the closet. This is because an increased visibility may mean an increased opportunity for both virtual abuse and offline physical violence.

The play, *Caught in the Act* (2010) positions the online space as symbolizing a double-edged sword for gay Africans; it can be the ultimate site for homoerotic experience and

performances, but it also holds a grave danger for both gays and their friends. It transpires that some of the defendants were caught looking at gay pornographic materials on the internet in a cybercafé. The prosecutor argues before the court:

"Defendant Eleven, Your Honour? She is the owner and operator of the brothel, which masquerades as the Cybersweet Café. Acting on information from a concerned citizen, Pastor Gideon Musoke, police conducted a raid on Cybersweet Café on April 2nd, 2010. They found the defendants engaged in the stated illegal activities. No, Your Honour, not actually in the act of committing homosexuality. They were creating, assembling and discussing pornographic materials promoting homosexuality."

The owner of the internet shop is also charged with the same offence. For the gay person using cybercafés, this assumption of the internet as a safe place to experiment with, or experience true sexuality may not necessarily be true, since if he is caught, he can put the shop owner in trouble. From this online drama, we see that the viewing of online gay pornographic materials carries the same penalty as taking part in gay sex in real life. The prosecutor's statement suggests that by allowing his internet cafe to be used to access homo-erotic materials, the owner of the cybercafé has become an accessory to the crime of sodomy, with both customer and café owner, putting their citizenship in jeopardy.

The trial of the defendants shows that queer communities in Africa exist simultaneously under, within and fighting and contesting a history of invisibility, the spectre of stigmatization and consistent legal harassment (see Mary Bryson, 2005). What this means is that the World Wide Web may not after all, represent a space beyond the control of those who define what is sinful against God and those who determine what is legal under constitutional laws. What Patel's online drama did is to build on news media reports, so we see literature in the online

space reporting the fear that surrounds the criminalizing of homosexuality in Uganda. As in news media reports, the play indicates that the proposed bill stipulates that anyone who comes into contact with a gay person is liable to be charged under the same Penal Code. This particular law as depicted in the online drama clearly points to the fact that citizenship is not guaranteed for anyone who comes into contact with a gay person. Given the homophobic law in the offline space, it is no wonder that the ten fictional defendants assume that the safest place for any Ugandan (straight or queer) perhaps lies in cyberspace, away from the physical reach of the state.

The fictional police informant in this play is a Christian cleric, Pastor Gideon Musoke. The statement he gives to the police describes "how the defendants corrupted his two-year old son by playing with him at the Cybersweet Café. Since that assault, the boy has exhibited homosexual behaviour. He cries like a girl. He wants to play with his mother's bracelets" (<http://www.kenyaimagine.com/67-International-Affairs/Social-Issues/Caught-in-the-Act.html>). The prosecutor, in building an anti-gay coalition between the state and the church speaks in an evangelical tone by telling the court that:

"Global warming is God's fire to burn homosexuals.

Malaria is God's scourge for their sins - and we are all paying.

They shall not live among us as homosexuals.

They shall not live among us.

They shall not live. "

By linking the church to the criminalization of homosexuality in this online drama, Patel is pointing out the role that Christian groups in particular, from within and outside of the continent, continue to play in Africa due to their interference in politics. The fictional Pastor Musoke represents this brand of anti-gay evangelical movements that are growing rapidly

across the continent (often American-styled and sometimes American-funded). The defendants in Patel's play therefore represent the persecution of queer bodies by the global Christian alliance. This statement may seem far-fetched, but if we look at the online activities of Project See ([www.projectsee.com](http://www.projectsee.com)) an American Christian fundamentalist group in Uganda, we can see that Shailja Patel is subtly pointing out the role that Christianity is playing in the on-going demonizing of African gays and lesbians. On Project See website, a statement aimed at East African internet users reads: "We advocate that abortionists and women determined to murder babies be driven back into filthy back alleys like other murderers, and advocate "homosexuals" be likewise driven back into the closet, arrested and prosecuted for sodomy according to God's law: even if they are rich American or European shogas!" (see <http://www.projectsee.com/backalleyabort.html>).

But while many Christian and Muslim clerics across the continent are often assumed to be speaking for the majority, sociological studies suggest that this may not be completely true. Serena Owusua Dankwa (2009) gauges the view of Muslim and Christian women in research on lesbianism in contemporary Ghana; she points out that although these women think that homosexuality goes against the teaching of their religions, they do not see it as evil. In addition they see through the hypocrisy of religious leaders, many of whom they believe are corrupt, and they see this corruption as more worrying than homosexual practices. Mary Hames (2003) argues that the fact that people like Pastor Musoke in *Caught in the Act* (2010) are laying claim to the un-Africanness of homosexuality based on the teachings of the Bible and the Koran, shows that they do not fully understand that these two religions are foreign concepts. As Dankwa (2009) argues, many Africans arguably hold a 'relaxed' attitude toward homosexuality and queerness, and what is currently accepted as the majority's perception of sexual normality in both the online and offline spaces may actually be the opinion of a



powerful African minority and their supporters from overseas.

This play can therefore be read as African literature's response to Ugandan politics, during the time that the country's parliamentarians were debating a stringent anti-sodomy law. The digital space of the internet and mobile phones allows writers to safely and quickly counter the heteronormative argument that is being put forward by the authority. Patel also understands that through these anti-sodomy laws, which are currently being used to target queer Africans, many politicians and religious leaders are united in their desire to monitor bodies that are deemed rebellious and un-African.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE QUEER BODY, THE DIGITAL SPACE AND THE AGENDA OF LATE CAPITALISM

In the previous chapter, I constructed a historical footprint of the agenda of same-sex desire in African literature and how this may be changing in the internet age. I argued that some members of the old generation of African writers used fictional homosexual characters as part of a larger project of decolonizing the African body but despite this agenda, their writing gave us a good insight into the figure of the homosexual. For some of the emerging voices, these earlier nationalistic projects contributed to the marginalisation of the figure of the African homosexual. In addition, their position seems to indicate that this figure is central to our understanding of the history of spectrality surrounding all marginalised bodies. In this chapter, I will be examining how some of the online fictional narratives are suggesting that the queer African body is also surrounded by the agenda of global capital. The agenda of capitalism as depicted in the online short stories this chapter is looking speaks to Dennis Altman argument (1997: 424), when he points out that in many countries including the non-West, “the range of homosexuality is growing.” While literature in the print age helped articulate the idea of nationhood and Pan-Africanism, online literature along with the rise of the middle class is now arguably the catalyst for the development of African queer identities.

Some of these online short stories are revealing to us that capital labour is connected to queer identity and also to the rising level of homophobia. In addition, what some of these young writers who are bold enough to write about fictional homosexual characters are showing is that African literature is now at the genesis of the localisation of queerness.

From the previous chapter, we see Shailja Patel's online courtroom drama *Last Word: Caught in the Act*, signifying the way in which many young gay Africans may be choosing to 'come out' - through the internet, because it is safe and probably because it allows for anonymity. In the online short story *Two-Step Skip* (2008), written for Outlier by the Nigerian author Crispin Oduobuk-Mfon Abasi, sexual violence becomes the only means of correcting that which is un-African. In the physical space, "corrective rape" has reportedly been used by some men on some African lesbians (Sitawa Namwalie, August 24, 2009). Moreover, some of the online literary texts also suggest that the theme of 'rape' is a very complex and highly problematic one for African queer study and literature.

The gay protagonist in *Two-Step Skip* is a young up-and-coming Nigerian journalist. Trying to avoid the danger and the social stigma of looking for a male lover in the physical space of Abuja, Nigeria, he decides to try internet dating. And through the popular gay dating website, Gaydar.com, he meets a man, who he secretly visits for the first time in a hotel suite. Through this story we see another way in which the online space can pose a danger for a gay person. That danger is manifested in the fact that the protagonist is lured from the safe environment of cyberspace into the physical space by a man who is using a fake name - "Dave" - and who ends up raping the narrator. As will be subsequently discussed, the rape of the narrator shows us how otherness is lived, embodied, represented, experienced and transgressed in contemporary Africa. Relishing the prospect that internet dating will be more liberating and safer than meeting men in the physical space, the protagonist enthuses:

"why should I bring the mysterious too close? There's a degree of safety in arms-length. So when I'm done, I do a little happy two-step skip; once again a child out to buy sweets and chewing gum and looking forward to savouring their sugary sweetness" (11).

The protagonist's experience symbolises the loneliness of being gay or lesbian in Nigeria. It also echoes the lamentation of "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child," which Joe Golder utters in *The Interpreters*. And just as four decades ago when *The Interpreters* was written, the world inhabited by gay and lesbian characters in many of these new online fictions is one of alienation. Alienation is derived from the Latin "alius" meaning "another" and "dianatus" meaning "estranged." (See Stéphanie Seingier, 1997). Hegel sees alienations as "a characteristic feature of the modern man, his sense of inward estrangements, of more or less conscious awareness that the inner being, the 'real' is alienated from the 'me', the person as an object in society' (Kolawole Ogungbesan, 206).

We see in these characters the constant notion of being described as un-African because of their sexuality, so in the process we see estrangement, uneasiness and friction in the physical space, which may have driven them to cyberspace in the first place. The protagonist chats up men online, but he is forced to meet them secretly in the physical space. He tries not incur the wrath of the contemporary society's homophobia and informs us "That way, I two-step skip the security system" (12). So desire is expressed openly in the online space, and experienced secretly - as a shadow - in the offline space.

Both the protagonist and his rapist use Gaydar.com because of the promise that online dating holds for those gays and lesbians who can afford online dating subscriptions. Like his rapist, the protagonist is also a closeted gay man, and he tells us that:

"Several people I know, including my girl and co-workers, question my sexuality sometimes because, braided hair and ladylike clothes apart, I'm one of those men born with very noticeable feminine traits. My colleagues often tease me about my voice and gestures. I've

even overheard some call me Dan Daudu, the northern derogatory term for a gay sex worker. Okay, so I too have sometimes wondered about myself. It's why I registered with Gaydar. In meeting Dave, I've come for an evening of intelligent conversation on art, politics, and, well, okay, gay issues as well. I guess at some level it can be said that I'm exploring. Perhaps even experimenting, though this truly is a mysterious world to me" (13).

This is a 'coming out' narrative that speaks to the role which the internet may be playing in the discovery of the 'real' self for many young Africans who have access to the internet, and perhaps, those who also have mobile phones. On the other hand, the people in the narrator's life suspect his homosexuality but may have chosen to take this possibility seriously by instead jokingly referring to him as a "Dan Daudu", because he has a girlfriend in real life. So, the Nigerian society is also in the closet. Also, by maintaining a front in having a girlfriend in the offline space while seeking a girlfriend in the digital space not only speaks to a crossing of boundaries, but to the 'down low' phenomenon, which Boykin (2005) suggests is common in African American gay men, who are sleeping with men (who they often meet online) while maintaining a female partner because of their community's homophobia. So, this is a Nigerian version of this the 'down low'. The digital space is therefore arguably becoming the space for gay and lesbian Africans to meet fellow Africans for either sex or a secret relationship. The protagonist's view of online dating as a site of queer enlightenment and experimentation, confirms Mary Bryson's (2005) argument that cyberspace can be "a powerful tool for learning to be, or perhaps more specifically, to do, queer" (85).

The chat-room of Gaydar.com is a site for the outing of the queer self and this corroborates the argument that gender is an act of performance (Annie Hau-nung Chang 2008). The social interaction between the protagonist and Dave alludes to the fact that internet chat is a prelude

to dating, which is an essential element of the twenty-first century narrative discourse. It depicts how the 'self' connects with like-minded people in this new media age. Echoing Clifford Geertz, Islam (2006) points out that internet chat-rooms make “metasocial commentary... a story they tell themselves about themselves, which can be seen as a reproduction of the collective life of the group, a self-enacted story with its users as narrators” (Islam, 2006: 82).

As Dave notices that the narrator speaks and looks like a girl, the narrator on his part confirms the desire to be a girl. He tells us that “I’d shown him my pictures on the net and had explained that I wished more than anything else that I’d been born a girl...I thought he understood all that well enough” (13). He tells us about the look people give him when he acts like a woman as “That look I get every day. The one which says, He must be gay!” (11). Here we see that the internet can also serve as a site for gender desire. At the root of the narrator’s (who is also the protagonist) desire to acquire gender through his online dating profile is the offline heteronormativity brought about colonial modernity, which demands that a man must sound and act like a woman, otherwise he could be considered neither a man or a woman. This is where we see the way in which people who do not fit into this man-woman binary can become a spectre, an invisible being which history refuses to place or acknowledge.

Dave (the rapist) has not experienced gay sex before and he is also a self-loathing gay character; the twin brother who, in online chats with the protagonist, he has earlier suggested on Gaydar.com as “the most enviable man alive for being successful with women” (13), turns out to be gay and the object of Dave’s homophobic rage. Dave’s self-loathing is also born out of his cowardice – the lack of courage to proclaim his sexuality in the physical space and instead restricted to avowing this queer desire only in cyberspace because of the heteronormative patriarchy of the ‘real’ world. Dave thus represents the authoritative and

hypocritical figure in the 'real' world, who while publicly condemning homosexuality as corrupting social mores, is secretly a closeted homosexual. His anger, which resulted in sexual violence, is perhaps the consequence of pent-up shame and sorrow.

An analysis of the pivotal figure of Dave, the man who raped the protagonist, is important to the way in which the queer African body has been consistently violated in silence, with no one to offer support and no possibility to legal recourse for justice. Monica T. Whitty (2003) asks researchers interested in cyber-flirting to look at how online daters choose to reconstruct the body in cyberspace. In the online space, the narrator tells us that Dave "is usually chatty and funny, eager to share anecdotes about his work and family," but in the physical space he is "bland", "inane" and "unsophisticated" (13). The screen name or alias of Dave therefore represents a certain image of homosexual self in the virtual world. Monica T. Whitty & Tom Buchanan (2010) argue that the name that online daters chose is an important factor in drawing people to their profiles as screen names are assumed by other punters as the initial window into one's online and offline personality. Moreover, *Two-Step Skip* (2008) reflects a true life story told by Sokari Ekine, the publisher of the queer blog Black Looks, about gay-baiting in Kenya and Ghana,

([http://www.blacklooks.org/2009/09/scammers\\_targeting\\_gay\\_men\\_in\\_ghana\\_kenya/](http://www.blacklooks.org/2009/09/scammers_targeting_gay_men_in_ghana_kenya/)). She reveals that emerging gay websites in Kenya and Ghana "are being used to trap" gays by men posting fake dating profiles, in the process luring the 'real' gay men from online chat-rooms into isolated offline spaces with promises of sex. The article then says that these gay men "are then either blackmailed or assaulted by the 'fake gays.'" In the online fiction *Two-Step Skip*, the charming Dave who initially chatted with the protagonist on Gaydar.com is arguable the 'real' Dave while Dave (the rapist) in the offline space of Abuja, is a by-product of an imposition from the larger society, the community that demands wife, children and toughness

from a man. The sexual violence visited on the protagonist symbolizes the fight-back by the heteronormative society against the coming out of queerness. Bryson (2005) argues that the increasing use of the internet and the adoption of digital technologies such as mobile phones may not bring an end to rabid homophobia and social alienation. In fact, they can be used to attack and legally persecute gays and lesbians as we have seen in this story and in Patel's online drama, *Caught in the Act* (2010).

While the rape of women (lesbians and straight) in wars and in domestic environments have been well documented around the world, the rape of gay men such as the protagonist in *Two-Step Skip* reveals the unreported sexual violence visited on gay men every day not just in Africa, but in many countries across the globe. These are people who could have met their rapists and may have forged a relationship with them through internet dating as Sokari Ekine (2009) reveals in her blog. As he rapes the protagonist, Dave loudly mocks the protagonist's effeminate built and dressing: "You're just like a woman! Look at your face! See your red lips. Did you use lipstick? (14). By mocking the protagonist this way, as he rapes him, Dave is trying to prove to the 'real' world that he is the opposite version of weak 'un-African' gay men who inhabit the digital space. Dave's mocking testifies to a postcolonial Africa's physical, affective and ideological concept of manhood.

As I have argued in this thesis, African literature in the online writing space gives us an insight into the way the global market forces operate within the continent. I am thinking here about Frederick Jameson's notion of "late capitalism." What these short stories and poems on African homosexuality have shown us is that there is a connection between the capitalist metropolis, national capitalism and African homosexual culture in the twenty-first century, notably enhanced by the new tools of globalisation of which the internet is an important part.

Some of the fictional queer African characters have become a representation of exploitation



by small and big businesses from within and outside of the continent. In addition, these new literary works highlight the history of sexual repression that trade and business foster in many societies. We need to be careful not to solely blame western capitalism for sexual repression, as oral history and written record have shown that the agenda of the merchant trade on the continent also supports sexual repression, of which the Trans-Atlantic slave trade is a good example. Another example is the condemnation of same-sex relationship in Ifa corpus of Yoruba, as being unnatural. There is a history of sexual repression in many societies across the globe due to the agenda of the local market and heteronormative traditions. As Peter A. Jackson (2009: 364) argues:

“The multiple modernities of today’s world cannot be explained as the bastard children of a single, foreign Western capitalism that has overpowered and raped local traditions. These modernities have equally emerged from local capitalisms that have revolutionized local pre-modern cultures.”

On the one hand, what we can be certain of, is that the market via the new media technology, has allowed a free space for the expression of queer desire and for us to witness the role that capitalism (both global and national) is playing in the repression of queer identity. Like Abasi’s *Two-Step Skip*, Eusebius McKaiser’s *Shades of the New South Africa* (2007) highlights the ease with which luxurious goods, foreign images and ideas, as well as people, enter from the continent from foreign countries. Likewise *Shades of the New Africa* reveals the ease with which increasing number of middle class Africans travel to the West and relate to Western culture through satellite television and the digital space, and shows that the agenda of capitalism within the continent now possesses many similarities to the agenda of global capitalism. Emerging gay culture in African urban areas as depicted in these online short stories therefore epitomizes what Jackson (2009: 386) refers to as “the contemporary world

of globally interconnected societies and cultures.” The protagonist in *Shades of the New South Africa* informs us that his “faghag” (that is a female friend of a gay man) is an African American Letisha. He also tells us that some of the people in some of Cape Town’s gay scene are people of different nationalities. These online short stories show us that the embrace of western consumerism by the African middle class alongside the rise of local gay culture may be leading to a new hybridization of the homosexual identity, something which may be completely different from the spectral history of same-sex relationships across many of Africa’s pre-colonial societies.

On the other hand, the protagonist in *Two-Step Skip* represents the unspoken and the unseen tragedy being inflicted by homophobia and the silence surrounding homosexuality. In addition, we rarely hear about the trauma of rape that some African men may have experienced because culturally, African men are supposed to be strong and able to cope with pain. The sexually-violated protagonist reveals the pain which has for long has remained hidden in the ‘real’ world, and which we are now just starting to see in the online space. The traumatic experience of rape also speaks to the aggression that is being visited on the weak (of all sexual persuasions and ethnic origins) by some of Africa’s ‘big men’.

Rape as it is being revealed in the online writing space has also become a tool which many religious leaders are now using to keep societal order, because some of them have voiced support for violence against homosexuals in Africa (see Hoad, 2007). The queer African’s body, in both the online and offline spaces, as represented by the protagonist in *Two-Step Skip* (2008), is thus a site for experiencing religious and neo-colonial violence. Dave as the rapist likewise embodies the heterosexual middle class and educated African male’s determination to remain in control of Africa’s destiny, and he carries out this agenda by forcing himself on the protagonist.

After he fought his rapist into a comatose state, the protagonist walks back into the real world as a queer Nigerian with spectral status, as an unreal man. Traumatized but still forced into silence by hetero masculinity of the outside world, and will only be able to tell his story only in cyberspace. Again, we see the queer person as the ‘loner’; the person who perhaps has no shoulder to cry on in the physical space and who remains a spectre haunting the postcolonial history. The protagonist’s experience in that hotel room symbolizes a re-enforcement of the culture of silence that currently surrounds queer bodies and identities in the physical space. The internet and the digital space provide this queer figure the chance to emerge from the shadow of African history. Abrahams (2008) argues that this “new visibility may have led to an escalation of this violence” (40). Abrahams also points out that such silence does not benefit the queer community, since people are getting raped whether they remain silent or speak out. The online writing space is not only becoming a space for affirming African queer identity but also the space for the outing of repressed memories for marginalised bodies. Therefore, we are seeing why queer activists along with writers and theorists of different sexual persuasions, need to tell the queer story in both the virtual and physical spaces of Africa. From these emerging African cybertexts, we are also seeing the way in which many young African writers are using the online experience of queer characters to portray the society’s collective danger, often stemming from those in positions of authority.

In addition, the rape of the narrator reveals the continuous exploitation of Africans by global capital. Rob Cover (2003) argues that queerness is often affected by the agenda of ‘late capitalism’. Through Dave, we see how emerging queer texts are suggesting that by supporting violence against the homosexual person, those in position of power in Africa are carrying out a capitalist agenda, one that sees orderliness and the rule of law as being

conducive to national growth and development. Homosexual bodies signify the unpredictability of the African market to foreign investors. As many of these new cybertexts reveal, capitalism weakens the communal spirit of Africa, as the twenty-first Century African middle classes have to spread across the globe in order to attain material wealth, but simultaneously, and as argued in the previous chapter on class, the nuclear heterosexual family setting is seen as the ideal space for business and national development.

Some of these new online writings suggest that there might not be a space for queer expression within this capitalist desire. The protagonist in Uche Peter Umez's online short story *A Night So Damp* (<http://www.author-me.com/fict06/nightsodamp.htm>), and the lesbian lover in another fictional piece by Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo, *Prisoners of the Sky* (2008), is forced to forgo substantial material benefits from their wealthy families in order to assert their queer identity. And the protagonist in *Two-Step Skip* (2008) tells us that he risks becoming a persona non grata within his capital-rich circle of friends and clientele, if it is confirmed that he is gay.

So, to violently abuse these queer Africans, as highlighted in these cybertexts, is to make a statement against crisis and chaos, thus telling the outside world that Africa is open and ready for business. Dave, the businessman from Lagos, arguably then represents capitalism's rape of Africa's human resources, as the violated narrator is a talented young journalist with great potentials, who has now been scarred for life by the sexual violence that he experienced in that hotel suite.

It is obvious that for a growing number of Kenyans and Nigerians, straight or gay, as well as for many across the continent of Africa, the internet is ensuring that knowledge once privileged and situated within the confines of higher education has never been more free, more plentiful, or more available; information technologies afford connection, mitigate

isolation, and even make way for social movements. On the other hand, Eve K. Sedgwick (1997) asserts that capitalism relies on stimulating human interest, and through some of these emerging narratives in the online writing space, we are seeing how the internet, as a product of capitalism, has become a tool for generating contemporary queer identity in Nigeria and Kenya.

The protagonist's lifestyle evokes middle class gays' preoccupation with living and negotiating what Rosemary Coombe (1992) refers to as "the everyday life of consumer capitalism and the way in which affluent gays and lesbians employ mass culture in quotidian practices" (16). Given the representations in many of these online queer writings, one can argue that material culture is implicated in the construction of queer identity. Queer performances in some of the online fiction often give little space for the expression of lower and underclass queer experience, since these groups have already been excluded by the barrier of language (the inability to read and write in European languages on which the internet is mostly based), and many may not be able to afford regular internet access due to subscription cost and bandwidth limitation. The protagonist in Eusebius McKaiser's *Shades of the New South Africa* (2007) recognises the omission of poor gay Africans from the mainstream gay culture on the continent, as he tells us that a would-be lover is unconcerned about the plight of young poor gay black men in Cape Town.

"Sifiso seems totally oblivious. These street kids are just part of the familiar landscape of Seapoint; to be negotiated but never to be acknowledged ... such honesty may ruin your appetite while sitting at Nescafé enjoying the morning's paper and overlooking the gorgeously blue ocean but for the aesthetic blotch of stray dogs and street kids..."

The state control of the media has been widely discussed and studied by many scholars, and

online African literature is showing us is that we also need to focus our attention on the potential level of control that access to the new media space gives to the educated class and how those who are in the new information network may unconsciously use the medium to their sole advantage, so much so that the unconnected may not be heard at all. Marianne Franklin (2009) asks us to seriously consider activity and ‘liveliness’ of internet users along with the dominant issue of power-holders in cyberspace. Our attention should not just be on the state and business corporations but we should also focus on powerful stakeholders beyond these two entities.

Furthermore, some of the emerging African queer texts are showing us how the lower classes are sometimes excluded and displaced from global cultural consciousness, and how this invisibility has been carried over into the online writing space, as much of the new queer fiction in this medium, speaks to the middle class African queer experience, while fictional characters of lower economic status are seldom portrayed. This is because the lifestyle of transnational young African writers who are easily at home in Lagos, London and Los Angeles is now being transplanted into fictional gay characters.

The gay protagonist in *Shades of the New South Africa* (2007) an online short story by the Oxford University educated South African writer Eusebius McKaiser, attests to this fact:

“So there I am in Joburg in Cape Town. Celebrating thirty years of survival. The crazy world refuses to stop and acknowledge my tenacity. I am invisible in a space littered with twig-figured girls and boys with bulging muscle, as sexy as Popeye after a can of spinach, about to rescue his beloved twig-figurine, Olive. They are all draped in Diesel, Levi’s, CK and other funk-indicating labels I cannot pronounce, let alone spell. They dance and giggle and strut around the dance floor, moving skilfully to local house beats, the imported cosmopolitan

sounds of London mixed with a hint of Gugulethu, to mask the victory of cultural imperialism. This is the new resistance politics. I inhale the sweet, horny smells of booze and cigarettes and sweat and hormones and youth and promise and life... the intoxicating aroma of the new South Africa. I sit in a corner, making love to a bottle of Castle while scanning the room. For sex. For escapism. I choose my strategy. I try hard to look ‘upwardly mobile’ ... yet chilled. The popular look seems to say “I’m-an-assistant-MD-but-have-loxion-kulca-flowing-through-my-soul”. I realise I am screwed. (Or rather I won’t be.) I’m not darkie enough to ooze even an ounce of loxion kulca through my coloured veins. I’m not rich enough to ooze assistant-MD. I’m not scrawny enough to masquerade the lie of ‘youthful innocence’. How did I sneak past the doorman? It must have been my coconut twang, I guess - but that brand seems so last year, as stale as the “I-spent-a-gap-year-in-London” gag.”

The protagonist informs us of the pretension of affluence, of gay men and women who affect foreign accents and like to display their collection of foreign clothes and other luxuries, so as to be accepted into the gay scene. This is a world that is far removed from the South African townships and a million miles away from most villages in Nigeria and Kenya, but this world is real to many middle class writers. What this means is that in this new century, as in the last, class remains a very important factor in literature’s representation of queer African life, because what literature is imitating is the fact that class embodies the experience of most African writers and this middle class queer experience is manifesting itself overwhelmingly in the new media space. As capital has bestowed on middle class writers the opportunity of modern education and the affordability of the internet, what we see is that the social relationships that fictional queer characters form in this online writing space mirrors the communities that writers themselves form online. The digital capital is therefore becoming the cultural capital. Rarely do we see fictional narratives or poems that capture the experience

of African homosexuals who live in rural areas or who are struggling to make ends meet in urban areas. Instead, fictional gay characters like real life writers are often affluent, educated and socially mobile. The protagonist in *Shades of the New South Africa* expresses frustration at the limited pool of lovers and tells us that he is used to “being spoiled by choice gay hangouts on Christopher Street in New York and Old Compton Street in London.” We hear his complaint because he has the financial capability to enter the gay metropolis, as both the character and the writer who created him come from the same world – that of the professional African middle class. Furthermore, these short stories in the new media space are confirming Cover’s (2003) assertion that capital labour is linked to both same-sex desire and homophobia. One can also point out that through these fictions, we are seeing the way that capital labour leads to social exclusion for many Africans, in this case, lower class queers; people who cannot afford to pay for internet dating, and who are excluded from many queer activities in Nigeria and Kenya.

The urban gay lifestyle is no different from the lifestyle that middle class straight characters lead in the short stories of Chimamanda Adichie and Teju Cole – they are immersed in Blackberry phones, bling, popular music and digital connectivity. For example, Nkem, the closeted lesbian lover in R.O. Okonkwo’s *Prisoners of the Sky* (2008), arrives in America from Nigeria, sporting “sparkling gold bracelets dangled around her neck and wrists.” As he enters a gay club in downtown Cape Town, the protagonist in *Shades of the New South Africa* takes in the bar staff and surmises straight away: “I can just imagine the job ads: ‘Fat and ugly men need not apply’. The gay market is tough. Certainly no place for oldies or fatties.”

The world of most fictional African queer characters seem to be that of “CNN”, the music of the American R&B singer R Kelly, physically-fit gay lovers and luxurious hotel rooms in Abuja and Cape Town - two of the most expensive cities in the world. And since affordability



equals accessibility, a subscription to Gaydar.com and a bottle of wine in a trendy Cape Town gay bar is perhaps beyond the reach of many poor gays and lesbians on the continent. The affluent lifestyle in addition to the internet and the expensive mobile phones that these fictional characters often carry as emblems in these online short stories represent the African middle class obsession with consumerism. Furthermore, these elements symbolise the transnational and globalised identity of many members of this social group.

In addition, *Two-Step Skip* shows us the way in which this growing quest for a connection with the outside world by Africans with disposable incomes may be leading to sexual violence. Organisations like Gaydar.com ([www.gaydar.com](http://www.gaydar.com)) are perhaps place where middle class gay Africans congregate and since the narrator is emotionally and geographically separated from his family and community, he is prone to capitalist exploitation since he has no choice but to buy companionship on the internet and can be induced to lead this ostentatious gay lifestyle. Cover (2003) suggests when global online companies sell to the middle class from the non-West, they hope to get some level of brand loyalty in return. This is how some of the world's most dynamic, far-sighted cultural organisations are enhancing their income and securing their future by linking with young African professionals - that most affluent, influential, sought-after demographic. So, in cyberspace, the queer African body simultaneously reveals and signifies the obscenity of materialism and exploitation.

Just as in Abasi's online short story, McKaiser's *Shades of the New South Africa* illustrates the way in which the new generation of African writers in cyberspace is moving the boundaries of ethnic, gendered and national identities by focusing on how the lack of empathy, sexual consciousness and violence affect Africans. In McKaiser's story, the protagonist Brandon is a highly intelligent and well-educated Black man, who is also

politically conscious. He understands the ambiguity of African queerness because this identity is arguably just coming out of a history that denies its existence. In addition, he seems to be struggling with the various forms of insecurity that gay and lesbian Africans have to contend with. The African gay scene is not only surrounded by wanton consumerism but there seems to be a mistrust and a pattern of violence within this community. Mistrust of the larger society and fellow queers, as well as violence from the larger society and fellow queers. Just as the need for companionship drove Dave in *Two-Step Skip* to the arms of his would-be rapist, Brandon in *Shades of the New South Africa* looks around Cape Town for sex. As he makes love to Sifiso, his latest sexual conquest, Brandon tells us about this frustration:

“I fall into an emotional maelstrom: lust, passion, fear, power, freedom... for a glorious five minutes I dominate him as I thrust myself into him...living the fruits of the new South Africa..... a liberating moment of abstraction from a diseased reality, obliging primal instinct, freeing millions of little Brandon’s without the burdened gate keeping of latex. We fall down, sweat dripping, clutching each other tightly, morphed identities strewn on a mat that reeks of the gay underworld.”

Gay South Africans were among the marginalised during the decades of apartheid and what this fictional narrative suggests is that South Africans may have ‘conquered’ apartheid but ‘the new’ South Africa is in the grip of homophobia, and that homophobia has led to pent-up frustration and confusion among gay South Africans. This sense of insecurity that Brandon expresses is soon confirmed when he finds out that Sifiso is “another self-loathing gay black man to deal with.” Self-loathing among gay Africans seems to be a common theme in much of the African queer fiction published online. Foucault (1981) argues that the society’s moral codes are made up of forms of subjectivities. This is arguably true for sexual intimacies such

as gay sex or sex with a prostitute. Sex with fellow gay men may make these fictional African queer characters feel good, but the sexual gratification and desire are overshadowed by a feeling that homosexuality is wrong. These mixed emotions therefore point to pathological and emotional disorders. It is therefore no surprise when Brandon informs us that Sifiso is a cold, calculated gay man who is having unprotected sex while being HIV positive.

Like Dave in *Two-Step Skip*, *Shades of the New South Africa*'s Brandon is made to suffer the pain of this HIV revelation in silence. He laments:

“The world outside is a rich cacophony of sounds...life continuing unabated. The only constant in this world is Life and the life of a particular human being is a mere dot in the continuous line of Life... the dot that is you will be replaced by a new one once you have faded. But god how I don't want to fade just yet. The birds are already chirping as if I had not just made a disastrous life choice born of insatiable self-destructive capacity ... human all-too-human ...”

### **Diasporic Queers in Online Literature**

When Wole Soyinka was creating the character of Joe Golder in *The Interpreters*, he probably did not know that Golder would become the precursor to many online black queer characters some four decades later. As a matter of fact, one can argue that Aidoo and Soyinka gave some of these emerging voices literary narratives to build on, because over forty years ago, they helped usher in a new model of queer African genre, in which the alienation is collective rather than idiosyncratically personal.

Golder's lamentation about home in *The Interpreters*, when he sings “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child”, is similar to the evocation of home and Diaspora that emanates in two of the online short stories published by Outliers (2008). The link I want to make here speaks to

the intertextual dialogue that Paul Gilroy famously refers to as the Black Atlantic. In Terna Tilley-Gyado's short story, *Spinning With Longing* (2008), and in Rudolph Ogoo Okonkwo's *Prisoners of the Sky* (2008), we see cybertexts re-telling the trans-Atlantic queer discourse which Soyinka initiated in *The Interpreters* (1965). In these two online stories, we get the classic trope of alienation that a queer black body may experience within this trans-Atlantic space. For example, the protagonist in the fiction, *Spinning With Longing* (2008), remarks that as a Nigerian American living in the US, she "was never the desired, only ever a witness to other women desiring each other. I didn't understand why I couldn't seem to get a foothold into this world I so much wanted to be part of. I didn't know there was really any other world for girls like me" (8). Thus in America, her black queer body has a double connotation; her queerness challenges America's homophobia, while her blackness becomes a statement against middle-America's acculturation and assimilation (see Bryant Keith Alexander, 2000). Also, her black body does not conform to mainstream America's ideal of female beauty. A highly-educated young middle class woman, the protagonist should have been able to fit right in with the Beltway crowd, instead, like Golder in *The Interpreters*, she aches for "home, home, home, home" (9). In addition, like Aidoo and Soyinka, the writer Tilley-Gyado, gives us a very prescient online short story in its mapping of the home-Diaspora conflict.

Like Golder, the protagonist in *Spinning With Longing* has experienced racism and alienation in America, so she goes to Africa in search of home in Nigeria, with her Nigerian-born mother's warning ringing in her ear; that Africans do not "believe in homosexuality, bisexuality, whatever. White people brought that thing with them. It is not natural for Africans" (9). In Nigeria, the homophobia that she encounters is fiercer than in America, and she has to confront the reality that the idealized image of home she has conjured up whilst in America, is not ready for a Black queer at all. Instead, Nigerian politicians are bent on

building on the anti-sodomy law inherited from the colonial government half a century before. She laments "the certainty of moral high ground magnified on the faces of those who believe such laws safeguard the souls of the nation..."(10). Men "toast" (the Nigerian youth slang for flirting) her but she can't bring herself to tell them she is a lesbian. Instead, she partakes in compulsory heterosexuality by not publicly querying the societal pretentiousness that there are no gays and lesbians in Nigeria, and that all grown-up daughters eventually seek men to marry. Her timidity in not outing herself as a queer person in Nigeria means that she perpetuates this culture of silence that I mentioned earlier (also see Notisha Massaquoi, 2008). As in Soyinka's *The Interpreters*, this story problematizes the idyllic imagination of homeland in Diaspora's popular productions (such as in reggae songs and sometimes in black cinema) because the physical space of Africa does not necessarily resemble the image that has been conjured up in the Atlantic world on the way back to Africa.

The protagonist's desire for home and her disappointment in what she witnesses in Nigeria give us a good view of the impact of colonial legacy on contemporary African thinking. Oyerunke Oyewumi (1997) argues that colonial modernity adversely impacted on African concept of sexuality and gender by introducing not only new types of gender but stratified straight versus straight sexual binary. Through these impositions, Oyewumi argues, colonial discourses reduced the complex ways social ideologies and cultural practices once operated in many African societies. Jonathan Alexander (2002) constructs a link between gender and queer desire; he points out that queerness has a tendency of destabilising established concepts of heteronormativity. Queer fulfilment could not be attained in Nigeria because colonial modernity has introduced Puritanism where sexuality is concerned. So, men are supposed to go with women and women must be attracted to men. This contemporary Puritanism means that the public easily becomes suspicious of 'deviant' behaviours.

Just as Sagoe, the journalist friend of Joe Golder in *The Interpreters*, views Golder's behaviour with suspicion because he is gay, the mother of the lesbian protagonist in *Spinning With Longing*, warns her daughter: "What kind of clothes are you taking? You can't just dress any way you want. It's not America. People will notice. Where are you going with these trousers?... You better not chase people's daughters over there oh" (8). Forty two years before this story, Sagoe, the fictional Nigerian journalist in *The Interpreters*, has expressed similar disapproval of Golder when he sees a copy of James Baldwin's novel, *Another Country*, lying on the backseat of Golder's car, by remarking "Why is this lying on the car seat? So when you give lifts to students you can find an easy opening for exploring?" (200). While Baldwin as a gay writer represents America's perversion to Sagoe, it is organic cotton trousers that become a symbol of queer perversion for the mother of the protagonist in *Spinning With Longing* (2008).

Like many years ago, some members of the middle classes, who despite the fact that they have studied and lived in America still see America as a pervasive site of sexual perversion, while Nigeria to them, is the antithesis of this supposedly American decadence. The protagonist evokes the memory of W.B Du Bois' double consciousness, when she speaks of not belonging in these two trans-Atlantic spaces by referring to "the queer twin" talking across two spaces – in the old world and in America. Interestingly, forty years after Joe Golder in *The Interpreters* could not find a lover on either side of the Atlantic, the lesbian protagonist in *Spinning With Longing*, informs us at the end of the story that she finally found love in America. These occurrences signify the fact that black kinship, shared history and geographical location do not necessarily equal stable identities, even in the age of Facebook and Twitter (see Macharia, 2009). For the protagonist in *Spinning With Longing* (2008), the 'real' Africa becomes an impossibility and like Joe Golder in *The Interpreters*, 'home', 'freedom', sexual desire and 'mother', all become elusive.

If one of the things *Spinning With Longing* (2008) is trying to show us is that racial identity can be a practice of queer intimacy, Rudolf Ogoo Okonkwo's online fictional piece for *Outliers* (2008), *Prisoners of the Sky*, actually makes this happen. It's a story of another young Nigerian-American female Nkechi, who is found frolicking by her parents in the back of a limousine with another girl on her high school's senior prom night. To her parents, her homosexuality is a sign of western corruption, a belief Nkechi thinks is incredible, given that her parents are university professors. Her father informs us that she has "staged the last stunt of your teen years here in America" (17), and dispatches her straight to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It does not take Nkechi long to realise that contrary to her parents believing that Nigeria will cure her lesbianism, queers actually exist in Africa. Her freshman year's roommate soon becomes her lover.

Like *Spinning With Longing*, this cyberstory moves the discourse of queerness beyond sexuality by focusing us on the construction of home and Diaspora, both in the sense of domestic intimacy (in Nigeria at the dormitory of the University of Nsukka) and in the sense of trans-Atlantic belonging. When Nkechi was sent to Nigeria, little did her parents know that she would find the love of her life in Nkem, whom we are told comes from a humble background: "Her mother was a petty trader and her father was a carpenter in their village of Ideani. She went to Queen's College, Enugu, on a scholarship" (18). Homosexuality thus cuts across class, but Nkem harbours middle class queer ambition; she wants to go to America and she waxes lyrically about the prospect of the state of Massachusetts legalizing gay marriage. She gladly tells Nkechi "Does the gay marriage law passed in Massachusetts mean that you as an American can marry me and then take me to America?"

Of course, that is not to be, as Nigeria's compulsory heterosexuality means that the only way in which Nkem can realise her American dream is by falsely agreeing to marry Nkechi's US-based cousin. In a dramatic ending, the two women came out by kissing in full glare of the public and before their relatives (who have come to welcome the bride to be) at an American airport. While same-sex desire cannot be achieved in Nigeria, America simultaneously becomes a site of tolerance and perversion. These movements between Africa and North America speak to African and diasporic queers' search for meaning. They force us to think through domestic spaces as sites of colonial and postcolonial queer intimacies.

The speaker in Cary Alan Johnson's (2008) online poem *Outlier* expresses the anguish of the Black gay man in America, his stance against the essentializing of the queer black body and the longing of that queer figure for home in Africa, away from the objectification of this body in America.

"I rail against any attempt to see my sexuality, my sex, my sexing as mainstream.

Normally, I'm abnormal...

I am a brother of Samuel Delaney's Time Square Red, Time Square Blue. Tell the truth.

There were dicks. They were sucked. It was lovely.

I'm a freak of brother from the People's Republic of Brooklyn who has chosen to live my life in Africa (dark, Dark Continent)

loving brothers loving brothers

knowing sisters (really knowing/trying).

Black men loving black men remain a revolutionary act..."

Like the two short stories, this poem illustrates how the black queer body becomes a tool of



resistance across the diaspora. The African diaspora in America gave birth to the “Black is Beautiful” slogan of the 1960s and 1970s, but the black queer body within that diasporic space is not yet accepted as beautiful. These creative works likewise make us to look at bodies that still remain hidden within postcolonial histories and narratives. Bodies, which contemporary gendered code refuse to integrate on both sides of the Atlantic. Macharia (2010) tells us that these bodies will remain a part of the postcolonial nationalistic projects and diasporic discourse for generations to come. In addition, these two authors contributed to our understanding of how various forms of border crossing continue to shape representations of sexuality in African literature.

### **Morality in the Closet**

In Uche Peter Umez’s online short story *Fragile* (<http://www.author-me.com/fict05/fragile.htm> : December, 2005), the protagonist, Nky, tells the story of her university rival Ijeoma, whom Nky says was prettier, more charismatic, more intelligent and even luckier than her when they were both undergraduates. While Nky describes herself at university as “petite” and “ordinary-looking like a village girl,” Ijeoma is likened to a beauty queen out of a television commercial. This description of village ugliness versus urban beauty not only fits into the pathologizing of the rural in online middle class narratives, but as discussed previously, it also speaks to another technique of queering a fictional subject. Ijeoma’s beauty is extraordinary, so she is no ordinary woman and in the process embodies a crisis in conceptions of femininity - there is real beauty, extraordinary beauty and village ugliness.

A few years after university, the two young women run into each other in a hospital corridor. Here, we are able to decode that behind the anger and the jealousy that Nky felt toward Ijeoma during their university days, there is a gay person who is dying to come out. Nky tells

us that Ijeoma “was the strange Miss Peacock ... and was hiding something, a foible, perhaps. I could almost see it, that spurious thing in her twinkling eyes and graceful gait. Like a watch-dog, I began suspecting here every gesture. At a point, she suddenly struck me as a mermaid” ( <http://www.author-me.com/fict05/fragile.htm> ).

This representation of African same-sex desire as “mermaids” or “spirits” reflects trends discovered in recent sociological and anthropological studies done on the subjects by African queer theorists. They include Dankwa (2009) who mentioned this in her research on lesbian relationships in post-colonial Ghana. Dankwa suggests that some ancient African societies fetishized queer people by ascribing to them supernatural powers. Tendi (2010) also points out that some ancient Africans believed that lesbians and gays have supernatural power, which can help or harm lesser beings. So, Ijeoma as mermaid becomes a spectral, unreal and ghostly. Soyinka emulates this legacy in *The Interpreters* (1965), when the narrator said this of a painting of Joe Golder: “His eyes revealed an unsuspected largeness, distending quite out of proportion...Kola, even before he began his canvas on the Pantheon, had remarked how well he would translate into one of the gods” (102). While Nky sees Ijeoma as “mermaid” through the prism of a middle class Nigerian with Christian sensitivity, this portrayal reprises the subsumed culture of powerful women such as witches, which are found in oral traditions across Africa (Olajubu, 2004). Through this cyber-texture, we see the fetishes surrounding the queer African body. So, Ijeoma the lesbian is being viewed in the same light as a witch or a supernatural being. Thus we see how cybertexts can bring to fore some of those forgotten elements of traditional African gender practices.

Nky’s hatred of Ijeoma grows as she sees signs of her own homosexuality in Ijeoma’s ‘suspicious’ behaviour. This story reveals the straight/gay dynamics in a contemporary African setting; Nky’s suspicion and subsequent hatred of Ijeoma reveal that in the physical

space, with its hostility toward homosexuality, the closeted queer person can result to simultaneous hatred of an openly gay body and the self-loathing of their own hidden sexuality. Nky's dilemma is captured by the protagonist in McKaiser's online piece *Shades of the New South Africa* (2007), when he informs the he bears "the self-hating burden of being a 'straight-acting gay man'", and that like many African queers he partakes in "sophisticated social games to keep our Christian sexual intuitions unchallenged; crowding out conversation with body-speak in case we don't like the monster cloaked in label and fancy dance moves."

The self-hating dilemma that these protagonists face speaks to what Eve K. Sedgwick in her seminal work, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1991), argues is the incoherent ideas about homosexuality. Since there is no room for homosexual expressions, these fictional characters resort to self-loathing and making up ideas about homosexuality. Nky's can only glimpse her own homosexual desire through Ijeoma, and due to the postcolonial Nigerian society's heteronormativity, she has learned to resent these urges.

Foucault (1980) points out that due to the society's need to make homosexuality a spectre, it simultaneously becomes an object of repression and desire. At university, this internalized hatred leads Nky to become homophobic in an attempt to deal with her own repressed sexuality. While she is dating a man, her description of her boyfriend confirms that it is the society that forces her into compulsory heterosexuality. She describes her fiancée: "he checked up on me, like a brother" (6). In Nky, the repressed lesbian person settles for a man that will suit what the society sees as a 'normal' person. Her heterosexual relationship is arguably not out of genuine love but because of the financial and emotional security that a relationship between a man and a woman provides. Her fiancée is a brotherly-like figure who has come to embody security, which she may not be able to get if she had embraced her 'real' self. What animates this particular cybertext further is that through Nky, we can see another

circumstance from which the homosexual figure may be emerging in the postcolonial state - from self-loathing, frustration and jealousy tinged with fear of the hetero-normative physical space.

*Fragile* problematizes the queer African body in other ways as well. Among these elements, is the pointer to how, in the physical space, the queer's body has now become a diseased body. While Nky, never quite escapes her imposed heterosexuality, the consequence of a homosexual lifestyle is manifested in Ijeoma at the end of the story. Through sheer coincidence, the two young women run into each other again, both as patients of the Medical Centre in Owerri. What happened next is that the once beautiful Ijeoma is now an emaciated patient, who is wasting away at the hospital. In this story, the gay body becomes tainted, with the once 'glorious' African person ruined because she is queer. This is the ultimate vengeance of the hetero-normative society – be queered and be punished in the process. Here, we see that some of the emerging online texts with a genuine intention of recognising the presence of queers in Africa's virtual and physical spaces, are now reprising the way in which earlier work of fictions in print such *Our Sister Killjoy* and *The Interpreters* treat homosexual characters. Ijeoma has travelled out of Nigeria in pursuit of a career in modelling, and Nky informs us that "She probably was enjoying life's sweet hors-d'oeuvre in South Africa, if she had not relocated to New York or Paris" (<http://www.author-me.com/fict05/fragile.htm> ). Therefore, she must have become a full-blown lesbian not in Nigeria but in a foreign land. Homosexuality and AIDS then both signify the degradation and corruption of African mores. In this online text, we see the narrator's a moralistic intervention, when we are told that "Ijeoma and I should be age mates, 25 years old. Now she looked like a hag, hopelessly aged by AIDS. What happened to those papaya boobs that stoked heat between a man's thighs? Big, firm breasts, men once ogled at, were now slack, and dry like withered grapefruits" (<http://www.author-me.com/fict05/fragile.htm> ). Here, Ijeoma's queerness becomes a sin,

and the wages of this sin is death through HIV AIDS. Here literary texts mimic the position of those who despise the queer body such as Pastor Mukuse (in Shailja Patel's play, *Caught in the Act*, 2010) who exploited the AIDS crises for their own political end by dehumanising non-heterosexual Africans.

By also looking at queerness through the prism of a deadly disease, we see fictional narrators arguably reducing the African queer experience to mere sexual lust – a reckless, risky and physical act between people who have no emotional maturity to develop a healthy relationship as dictated by the hetero-normative space that is Nigeria. So, we see through this particular cybertext, the way in which some of Africa's new writings may be following the old stereotype of HIV AIDS as a 'gay disease' (see Tim Edwards, 1992 & 2004). As we have seen in Shailja Patel's online drama, *Caught in the Act* (2010), the people who are against the queering of African cyberspace are trying to link African homosexuality to HIV AIDS despite the fact that there is no substantial scientific evidence so far to suggest that the African gay community is over-represented among HIV AIDS sufferers in relation to its proportion within the continent's population (see Ince, 2009).

Towards the end of the story, Ijeoma, in her position as a sinner, makes a confession to Nky, who has now assumed the role of the pure African (because she refuses to yield to lesbian urges). Ijeoma tells us who might have infected her with the AIDS virus: "It wasn't Anne," she began speaking fast as if to spit everything out of her chest. 'Cleo is one kinky fairy of a girl. She is fun, but sleeps with men. We quarrelled several times. Lorraine is sort of a live-in mate, cool-headed. And there is Omphile. She has feisty Italian blood. Lerato – she is as erotic as her name Lovable Olivia. It could have been any of them.'" Here, we witness a re-emphasizing of the foreignness of homosexuality and as the gay person as a loner. The gay person is a loner because she refuses to have a family and has not joined the 'community'. She is the 'poisoner' whose very existence threatens the society. Like Sissie and Joe Golder

forty years before, Ijeoma's queerness as depicted in the online space speaks to a history of shadows. Ijeoma is thus that spectre - the figure that haunts histories which have long excluded them.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### FROM THE PRINT TO THE WEB: MODERNITY AND THE LIBIDINAL MODERN GIRL

Much of the creative work that came out of the first half of the last century looked at alienation and disaffection, which fictional narrators regularly blame on growing urbanization and the negative effect of modernity on young people, especially young women. Now, several short stories that are being published in the new media space are preoccupied with the life of urban dwellers and the mannerism of those who are usually identified with that space. By examining urban settings, this thesis is thinking through to the lived practices and representations through which a variety of spaces are constituted within the scope of cities such as Lagos and Nairobi. Through some of these online creative works, we see a continuation of the contemporary tradition, where literature becomes a tool for reporting intimacy and for cementing in the reader's mind those stories that have become the fabric of contemporary life.

*Ashewos Anonymous* (15 June 2009) - a short story posted on Facebook by the Nigerian writer Terfa Tilley-Gyado - shows that while many new texts in the digital space can be seen as representing an alternative to mainstream intimate discourse, other new texts moralise and perpetuate the accepted decorum on intimacy. In this story, we meet a figure familiar to many city dwellers and cultural anthropologists alike, and a person who has likewise become a regular staple of many fictive narrations. She has a history that dates back almost a century in Africa, and she is the sexualised modern urban 'girl' or 'good time' woman. I want to show that even in the digital age, African intimacy can be analysed and understood through the figure of the libidinal modern girl, because she represents the conflict between traditional and contemporary notions of courtship, romance and sexual relationships.

Simon (1996: xvii) remarks that “all discourses of sexuality are inherently discourses about something else.” Through this fictional character, we will see how the discourse of colonial modernity created, shaped and has continued to maintain subjugated bodies, and in the process, created a confusion that still haunts Africans living in the digital age. The argument is that fictional narratives and poetry are showing us the way in which many Africans are conflicted between what they perceive as the African way of life and what they see as a modern lifestyle. And this is because for more than a century they have been facing competing and multiple perspectives which often oscillate between the Euro-modern and the African. Literature, like the contemporary society it tries to represent, has been trying to resolve this dilemma through the figure of the modern girl. In addition, through this struggle, literature shows us that the modern girl encompasses two bodies within modernity – that of the libidinous woman and the contemporary figure of romantic love. By looking at the figure of the modern girl, we see how members of a new generation of writers, like the generations before them, are navigating between these discordant messages.

*Ashewos Anonymous* continues African literature’s long fascination with this representative of the contemporary African woman. The narrator tells the story of six socially mobile Lagos women who meet regularly in “a small conference room at the Eko Le Meriden.” The women, we are informed, are addicted to sex, and the narrator paints a familiar and vivid picture of their meeting as that of members of a self-help group who sit around to discuss their problems “in a semi-circle”.

One reader, Ekide Ekrika Nwanze, says:

“It is so true, it hurts!! . Sadly the biz of 'Ashewo' has been 'rebranded' . They drive the posh cars, live in big houses, they are the bigz gals, the movers and shakers of the big



cities, they even get political appointments!! Sad, very sad. God help us. Nice piece, very humorous too, I didn't want it to stop “(Tuesday, 16 June 2009 at 21:34).

In *Her Friend's Father* (2010), a short story by the young Kenyan writer Pauline Odhiambo, which is published on the Kenyan-based Storymoja blog, we hear similar sentiments being expressed by readers commenting on the fictional narrative about a fictional twenty-year old Nairobi woman, who is having an affair with her best friend's father, and who is using the money the man is giving her to buy mobile phones and mobile phone accessories. Some of the responses to the story include:

“I found this a sad story, but very well told - very candid and a great opening paragraph. I'm not sure who was manipulating who in the story but I doubt that we can fix what seems to be a modern day form of prostitution which isn't going away any time soon.....” –Yvonne

“Real life during these real times...all u gotta do is be very careful.” – Hmutugi

“The introduction of this story is very catchy. It's creatively written. Your story is real. It happens every day, and brings to light the strange behaviors of Kenyan men. I am one of them, and for sure we Kenyan men don't know what we want. And hence, we end up being manipulated... It's sad. Pauline, I would advise you to come up with a book, exposing how Kenyan men are being exploited by college girls. I am a writer and dream of writing a book explaining the same. Men, when will begin identifying what we want? Let's be ourselves. Cheers Pauline! Keep up the good work.”-

Cheptiony Mutai ([cheptionymutai@gmail.com](mailto:cheptionymutai@gmail.com)).

From these comments from Kenyan and Nigerian readers, we can see how a piece of fiction can serve both as source material for social anthropology as well as a means of confirming what people have read and seen in cyberspace. Like the familiar fictional narratives and letters published in the Agony Aunt columns during the era of *Drum* and *Spear* magazines - between the 1960s to the 1980s across many English-speaking African urban centres - readers of many of these online short stories that are appearing on Facebook and other new media platforms, often comment on fiction by relating their personal experience of intimacy to the fictional characters, which writers have created. And by instigating discussions on these fictional characters, the online writing space becomes a site not only for societal gossip but for defining gendered performances. We can see that almost all of the readers put the blame of sexual immorality and deviancy on the fictional female characters, while male characters are often not condemned but are seen as victims. Having several lovers is an act that the contemporary society allows men, while 'good' women are not supposed to do likewise.

D.O. Adebayo et al (2006) argue that not only does the society and culture influence intimacy, but sexual behaviour in Africa is also impacted upon by technology. At the beginning of the last century, the printing press helped define the modern African girl as sexualised and corrupt, now at the start of a digital age, some of the new online fictions are suggesting that this stereotype remains tenacious. When it comes to debating intimacy, the internet can allow the writer and his readers to collude together in writing and commenting on the body, especially in the digital space of social networks. While this was also possible in the print age, the immediacy of the internet perhaps brings a closer interaction between the two parties. Readers and writers can comment quickly on real life and fictional characters, and a debate or even an online community can grow quickly from these discussions in a way that may not have been possible in the print age.

For example, the interactive discussions that ensued on the writer Tolulope Popoola's creative writing blog, led to the formation of *Favouredgirl Writes* - a Facebook fans page with about four thousand members, and which is dedicated to both fictional and real life discussions on sexual intimacy and romance in Nigeria and Africa. The blog *Myne Whitman Writes*, which describes itself as "authoring romantic fiction and sharing thoughts on life, love, books and Nigeria", and which is published by a Nigerian writer, writing under an alias Myne Whitman, grew into a Facebook page with the same focus as the blog. These transmissions of fictional texts in cyberspace between different digital means show that they speak to different levels of portrayal of reality; from the media to the fictional and how these levels intersect within texts.

Tilley-Gyado covers lifestyle news and political blogs for the Lagos-based digital media company [234next.com](http://234next.com), where he works as a new media journalist. And like Popoola, Whitman, Odhiambo and Tilley-Gyado, other emerging writers are no strangers to gossip about sex and politics because they often work as journalists-cum-creative writers. This is very similar to what previous generations of writers did in both Nigeria and Kenya, as well as in many other African countries. This connection is important because there is a link between African literature and its journalism, especially when it comes to the way in which the figure of the libidinal modern girl has been constructed and maintained.

For example, between the 1920s and the 1940s, Isaac Bamidele Thomas, the author of *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḽeyinju, Eḽegberun Oko L'Aiye* (1929) was a popular Lagos-based journalist, who also became well known for the character of the modern girl Sẹgilọla, who he created and made famous. Thomas initially published the story of Sẹgilọla in the popular Lagos newspaper, *Akede Eko*, of which he was an editor. The collection later metamorphosed into the first novel written in Yoruba. Just as some members of the online public are commenting on many works of literature being published in the digital space, the print public

of the last century also used the print medium to comment on the modern women and their representations in literature.

As a response to the fictional figure of Sẹgilọla, many readers wrote to I.B. Thomas to express their condemnation of modern women. Among them is this response:

“Nwọn ha le l'ojuti, ki nwọn ma hu oniruru iwakiwa ni'le ọkọ wọn, ki ale mẹta, mẹrin lode maṣe tẹ wọn l'ọrun, nwọn ha le loju ti ki oni gbese ma wọ ti rẹ ni ile wọn, tabi ojuti a wa, nwọn a ma mu Sarotu *Cigarettes* ati *Cigar* l'ọju gbogbo enia Apejọ, nwọn a ma mu Ọti bi ẹni mu Omi, nwọn a ma sọrọ alufanṣa lenu, nwọn a ma wipe ọkọ mewa ki nse baba mewa, o ni lati tun ma lọ fọ iyere na l'odo mirantiti iyere yio fi mọ; nwọn gbagbe pe iyere ti nwọn fọ ni odo kini, ikeji, ikẹta, ikerin ti ko mọ, ti nwọn ko ba dehin, ijọkan-jọkan ni odo yio gbe ati awọn ati iyere wọn lọ bamubamu.” (Akede Eko; August 15, 1929).

(Trans: *"If modern women have any shame, they would not be misbehaving in their matrimonial homes, they would not be having three, four lovers and still want more. If they have any shame, debt collectors would not be visiting them at home and they would not be smoking cigarettes and cigars in public, or drink alcohol as if it were water. They wouldn't be very loud and proclaim that ten husbands do not equal ten fathers, and that they need to be sexually satisfied by as many men as possible; they have forgotten that taking on one, two, three and four lovers will lead to destruction"*).

Cyprian Ekwensi, the creator of another fictional modern girl, *Jagua Nana* (1961), was also a highly-regarded Lagos-based journalist who implanted many of the real life characteristics he encountered in his journalism career into fictional work, including *People of the City*, *Jagua Nana* and *Jagua Nana's Daughter*. In a similar pattern to the public's reaction to Sẹgilọla,

many readers also reacted passionately to these fictional characters especially that of Jagua Nana, the Lagos prostitute. They wrote directly to Ekwensi, so as to condemn those real-life 'Jagua Nanas' that they knew across many Nigerian towns and cities. (See Ernest Emenyonu, 1974).

As pointed out in the introduction to this thesis, literature in Africa arguably positions the author as an intentional subject. So there is the frequent connection between life and art, in addition to the notion that texts and their productions are hard-wired elements of human cognition. The privilege of being connected to real-life human characters – the pulse of urban life, gives African writers the opportunity to utilise the tool of verisimilitude in their creative work. These interactions also mean that writers often have access to the latest societal gossip, which often find their ways into literature. In the Facebook fiction *Ashewos Anonymous*, "Eko Le Meridien", the hotel in which the women regular meet, is a real life place that often features in the print and online news. Other young writers likewise tend to include familiar places and familiar elements of contemporary life such as popular music and celebrities, in some of the short stories on African intimacy.

By building on readers' familiarity with real life spaces and mimicking real life scandals, writers are using online fictional narratives to intentionally map fictions back to real life. This is also a technique that the new generation, writing in the digital age, may have copied from some of the notable writers who have commented on the figure of the libidinous modern girl, over the course of almost a century. For example, in the prologue to the fictional text of *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Segilola Eleyinju, Elegberun Oko L'Aiye* (1929), the narrator tells us that the fictional character physically walked into the office where the writer usually works as editor.

“Obinrin yi funrarẹ ni o f’ẹsẹ ara rẹ tọ wa wa l’aşale ojo Saturday kan ninu Office wa ni No. 47, Bamgboşe Street, Lagos, ti alagba obinrin na si fi ẹmi-ẹdun ọkan rẹ bẹ wa pe inu on yio dun pupọ bi awa be le gba ọjẹgẹ fun on lati ma kọ itan igbesi aiye on sinu iwe irohin wa ‘Akede Eko’ ”. (2).

(Trans: “*This woman, of her own accord walked into our office on No. 47, Bamgboe Street, Lagos, and begged us that she will be very pleased if we can allow her to publish her life story in our publication ‘Akede Eko’*”).

Though the fictional narrator Thomas blurs the line between reality and fiction, he positions the narrative in real-time and places the protagonist in locations readers can identify in real life. (See Barber, 1997). In addition, the protagonist tells us that she knows most of the important men living in Lagos at the time, and that if her identity is revealed her own scandalous sexual exploits will tarnish their good image. The observational skill of the writer as a reporter is thus effectively deployed to construct the image of the libidinal modern woman as possibly a real life character, who is scandalous and tainted; a woman who may be the ‘girl next door’ but whose presence jeopardizes the communal wellbeing.

Thomas not only wrote a ‘novel’ warning readers about the antics of his protagonist, he also took it upon himself to comment on the sexual antics of real life and fictional modern women alike, in addition to encouraging his readers to write letters of condemnation against modern women’s supposed sexual waywardness. Through these discussions in *Akede Eko* newspaper, the writer used his position to embark on a crusade against the modern girl, and he arguably saw himself as saving Lagos and the Nigerian society from the destructive impact of the behaviour of this fictional character.

In *Jagua Nana*, Ekwensi uses the same energy that he employed in his journalistic career on the body of the libidinal protagonist. Like I.B Thomas, some thirty years before, Ekwensi

also sees his role as a journalist-cum-fictional writer, saving the society from modernity's decadence, and he takes that role very seriously. As the literary theorist Ernest Emenyonu (1974: 42-43) points out:

“Ekwensi knows his city (Lagos) very well. He also knows to the most minute detail the idiosyncrasies of the characters he has chosen who are symptomatic of the moral depravities of the city...The author's didacticism and sense of retribution are very much in evidence in every action in the novel. Often he oversteps his role of mirroring society to that of standing in judgement over it. He is both the plaintiff and the jury and the only clause in his Magna Charta is that 'the wages of sin is death.' ”

Adrienne Rich's (1980) assertion that the body is political rings true when it comes to African literature. Rich sees the human body, especially the female body, as being central to various authorities' attempt to control and police the human society, since the female body is often depicted as being spiritually and emotionally weak – a means through which the wider society becomes corrupted. In African literature, the figure of the modern city girl is often cited as a good example of the corruption that is consuming the contemporary urban life, which is why the journalist as a creative writer often places the libidinous modern woman in the city. Segilola, Jagua Nana, the prostitutes in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1964) *Weep Not, Child*, and the female characters in *Ashewos Anonymous* are women of the city and they embody sex and the city. The urban landscape also serves as a metaphor for modernity and the moral corruption that comes with it.

Michael W. Ross (2005: 342) argues that “sexuality in the unfolding age of the virtual age is also a discourse about human interaction at the closing of the mechanical age.” For both print and new media writers, fictional characters such as Segilola, Jagua Nana and Okunrinoletemilorun (the fictional founder of the self-help group *Ashewos Anonymous*) are

not emerging out of a vacuum; these fictional figures reveal the energies that propel modernity, first in the colonial years and now in the postcolonial era. Modernity or as Segilola puts it “ilaju”, includes technological advancement brought about by the encounter with Europe. At the same time, “ilaju” represents wanton materialism to some writers who arguably think western capitalism as represented by colonial modernity also embodies female libidinality. By using fictional figures to represent this danger, these narratives are trying to use literature as a harness to pull back the society from the abyss of its obsession with all aspects of modern life.

Through their work as people who comment on the society, literature and through journalism, modern African writers not only report on current affairs and serve as custodians of history, they have also become powerful cultural agents who inscribe certain meanings on the body of the African woman. Writing on the body is a mode of signification that draws attention to how corporeality speaks to African women and on behalf of the society at large. Foucault argues that the body is subject to control by various regulatory authorities, such as the church and the state, and in the process these authorities monitor and discipline the body. Moreover, the body itself is “totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body” (Foucault, quoted in Elizabeth Grosz, 1994: 146).

This Foucauldian model assumes that the society inscribes on an almost neutral human figure but Judith Butler cautions against this view by pointing out that through its discursive practices, the society writes differently on the male body from the way it does on the female body. She states that the very surface of the body is discursively produced, and that this production is based on gender. “Gender-instituting prohibitions work through suffusing the body with a pain that culminates in the projection of a surface, that is, a sexed morphology” (Butler, 1993: 65). The same discourses which produce the bodily surface work to keep the surface intact by regulating passages through body openings: “The construction of stable



bodily contours relies upon fixed sites of corporeal permeability and impermeability” (Butler, 1990:132).

However, the permeability and impermeability of the body is regulated differently for male and female bodies. Women are soft, penetrable matter with no really stable surface at all, whereas men's bodies are 'sealed off', and powerful taboos are placed on the penetration of their bodies and where their sexual organ should penetrate (see Waldby, 1995: 268-9).

Moreover, it has been argued that bodies are masculinized and feminized precisely in regard to penetration. What often transpires in literature is that modern women are depicted as being more readily susceptible to moral corruption than men because the bodies of men are hard to penetrate while the body of women, especially the bodies of libidinous women are weak and easily surrender to sexual depravity, and in the process a woman's body becomes a metaphor for the community's moral weakness.

### **The Emergence of the Libidinal Modern Girl**

If we are considering the way in which writers and readers alike have come to define and decide on the figure of the libidinal woman over the course of a century, we should also look at the 'invention' of this figure. And we must ask through what frames, what paradigms and what methods did this figure emerge, and how has it been sustained in literature and in contemporary discourses?

The fact is that this figure cannot be approached without looking at the discourses of colonial modernity. Hazel Dicken-Garcia (1998) points out that what is happening in cyberspace can be traced across time. She argues that “At the broadest social level, some universal truths are that people inherit a cultural tradition and approach their interpretation of everything with

ideas already in mind.” (20). Internet discourse does not just come out of the blue, it has a history and the internet is a continuation of what occurred prior to the new media age. So, we require a historicization of the figure of the modern libidinal woman since we cannot understand her representation in the new media age without examining the way she has emerged during the early years of print technology. In addition, we can argue that the body of the modern woman as libidinal (as represented in some books and in some online creative writing) is an extension of the discourse about the body of real-life females. Therefore, securing such real-life and techno bodies against loss become imperative to our analysis of literary representations.

If we read some of the fictional stories that came out of the first wave of modern African writing and look at figures such as that of Sẹgilọla as told by I.B Thomas in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḷeyinju, Eḷegbẹrun Ọkọ L'Aiye* (1929), we will begin to see the libidinous modern African woman as a process-making figure. When we first encountered Sẹgilọla in the first two chapters of *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḷeyinju, Eḷegbẹrun Ọkọ L'Aiye*, she makes a very important statement; she tells us that longs to be “iyawo arede” (2) – which is a modern wife who is married in the Church or in a government operated marriage registry, and not through the traditional Yoruba wedding like her parents. Here, Sẹgilọla projects herself as a figure of colonial modernity and she also imbues herself with all the aspirations that she thinks modernity brings. But Sẹgilọla faces two challenges; she is a woman who enormously likes men and money, and she knows that one man cannot satisfy her sexually and financially. And although she wants to become “iyawo arede”, her libidinal status means that the position of “iyawo arede” is closed to her. This sentiment that Sẹgilọla expresses is similar to the one expressed almost a century later by the libidinal women of *Ashewos Anonymous*; the desire to re-brand their image and live like western women. These desires arguably draw on how modernity is perceived by some Africans as 'progressive', and African

tradition as 'backward'. These quests also speak to the effect of colonial modernity and on the conception of womanhood in contemporary time since gender becomes a desire, and the process of attaining modern womanhood is a ritual that is grounded in Euro-modern performances.

Oyeronke Oyewumi (1997) argues that colonial modernity created gendered bodies by enforcing ways of enacting male and female, instead of the unfixed binaries that existed in many African societies prior to the colonial encounter. This made African men masters over women, in a process that reduced the complex ways social practices operated pre-slave trade and pre-colonialism. The Kenyan literary theorist Keguro Macharia (2012) takes this argument further; he argues that colonial modernity created "gendered spectrality" of some women who refused to partake in colonial modernity's gender dichotomy. This includes the fictional character of Muthoni, who, in Ngugi's *The River Between* tells us that "I- I want to be a woman. I want to be a real girl, a real woman, knowing all the ways of the hills and ridges" (26) (Keguro Macharia's "*How Does a Girl Grow into a Woman?*": *Girlhood in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's The River Between*, to be published Spring 2012). From Muthoni, we see that prior to the colonial era, gender among the Gikuyus is something you perform, as it was not pre-determined. Muthoni, out of her own free will chooses to take on the role of a woman, while the women in the Facebook fiction Ashewos Anonymous, and the protagonist in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḽeyinju, Eḽegbẹrun Ọkọ L'Aiye*, have already had the female role imposed on them. So, what we see in literature is the effect of colonial and neo-colonial education on writers and the fictional narratives that they produce.

Stephanie Newell (1997) sees African literature's obsession with the modern girl as reflecting the struggle between the discourse of colonial modernity and African texts. Through historical analysis, she points out that from the 1880s to the 1940s, the objective of colonial administrators with regard to educating African women is to train young women who will

have good Christian values, while the training of young African men was geared toward preparing them for leadership role both at home and at work. Good girls are thus expected to be sexually docile, listen to their husbands and be respectful to male authority. This attitude, F. Abiola Irele (1972: 7) also points out, heavily influenced the first wave of modern written literature in Africa, as “the missionary presses for a long time provided a model of publishing for the new, educated class which the missions were helping to create”.

Marc Epprecht (2009: 1261) argues that writings by westerners during the colonial era by regularly portray African women as being sexually rampant and that they characterised this promiscuity as pathological and dangerous. Epprecht points out that:

“they understated or outright ignored African women’s agency in sexual decision-making...Many subsequent accounts by European authors stressed what they perceived as African women’s subservience and easy sexual availability to men (prima facie evidence: polygyny, as well as pre- and extramarital sexuality)...One way to get the men to work for Europeans in bad jobs for low pay was to cut them off from the ancient sexual moral economy, by force, by law, and by shaming as necessary. The moral argument was frequently buttressed by the use of scientific-sounding language that somewhat obscured the colonizing intent, including under the rubric of ‘ethnopsychiatry’ in the 1930s to 1950s.”

And if we accept these arguments, we can suggest that the libidinal modern girl emerged in African literature from a Christianity-infused colonial tradition that sees female intimacy as being made for procreation and not for pleasure, and which African men are arguably exploiting to their own advantage. Moreover, several fictional texts which have dealt with the sexual behaviour of modern urban women often preach the importance of chastity over sexual pleasure. A woman who seeks to have sex for pleasure like these fictional characters

we have examined so far, disrupts the sexual balance created by colonial modernity, and in turn may challenge the authority of the state, and is therefore marked out by literature, so that readers may identify the danger she poses to the society.

In 1929, the narrator in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḷeyinju, Eḷegberun Oko L'Aiye*, towards the end of his narrative uses the term “Ashewo” to interpret the figure of Segilola, eighty years later, the narrator in *Ashewos Anonymous* uses the same word to describe libidinal women. It is important to note that the word “Ashewo”, which often refers to female prostitutes in Nigeria means “money-changer” in Yoruba, and the money aspect of it arguably refers to the currency - coins and notes that came with the British - and not to the cowries that were exchanged for goods in pre-colonial era. So we can argue that the figure of the libidinal modern woman and the discourse surrounding her are likely to have come out of the colonial encounter, especially the sex trade along the West African coast. This is very significant in our understanding of how many new indigenous fictional characters and words came out of the discourse of modernity and how they became ingrained into postcolonial identity.

What Thomas’ fictional narrative did some eighty years ago and what many writers after him have done is to filter fictional representations through the Bible and through the concept of modernity that came from the Christian tradition. In *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḷeyinju, Eḷegberun Oko L'Aiye*, both the fictional narrator and the writer consistently use quotes from the Bible along with several concepts of colonial modernity to create, portray and condemn the figure of Sẹgilọla. This is also what Cyprian Ekwensi did about twenty years later in *People of the City* (1954) and in *Jagua Nana* (1961). In 2010, Sifa Asani Gowon concluded her online short story on the libidinal protagonist in *The Adulteress* with these words; “Scripture from John 8: 4 - 11.”

On the part of male narrators and the contemporary society, what we have seen in all these fictional narratives is that the libidinal woman is a rebellious figure that refuses to live according to God's will and so refuses to be dominated by men. And because of her refusal to listen to the male authority she is often punished and the only way to escape societal rage is by resubmitting to the authority of men and God. For example, in Gowon's *The Adulteress* (2010), redemption lies only in the libidinal woman accepting to be subjugated by either men or the authority of the Christian 'God'. The narrator in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḽeyinju, Eḽegberun Oko L'Aiye* (1929), likewise uses several quotes from the Bible to condemn the protagonist and her sexual waywardness.

In Sifa Asani Gowon's short story for Sentinel Nigeria Online – *The Adulteress* (February 2010), we see the image of the libidinal woman both as a suffering machine and as an undisciplined body who cannot be trusted. The protagonist is caught in bed with a man who is not her husband and she is sentenced to death by the society for betraying Christianity's sexual code. She narrates her ordeal, "Presently, I feel myself being thrown to the ground. The crowd has swelled in size. I knew the end was coming soon. Then I heard Binyamin shout, 'Teacher, this woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery. In our law Moses commanded that such a woman must be stoned to death. Now, what do you say?'"

The protagonist accepts that she has sinned by having an extra-marital affair, but that she did it because of love and to escape the misery of a joyless marriage. She is saved from being executed by an influential figure within the community, Yeshiva, whom she describes as "Never had anyone looked at me that way. Not with lust, or hate or jealousy. But with love and tenderness so pure it seemed otherworldly...I felt shame, fear at the same time. I wanted to throw myself at His feet and beg, not for my life, but for forgiveness."

Yeshua of course can be read as the figure of Jesus Christ and this is buttressed by the fact that the word ‘his’ with reference to Yeshua begins with a capital letter ‘H’. For a libidinous woman, the wage of an extra-marital affair is sin, and the only way out is the acceptance of Jesus and Christianity. Nowhere in this story did we hear about the man the protagonist was sleeping with being punished. And most of those who wanted to kill her prior to her being rescued by Yeshua are men.

Despite the fact that this particular short story is written by a woman, the message here is that a libidinal woman inhabits a tainted and scandalous body. Women are not supposed to have extra-marital affairs because it goes against the teaching of the Bible and in addition, women are not meant to go outside of marriage, even if it is to experience the joy and pleasure of sex. Furthermore, the susceptibility of the female body to sexual immorality can be read as affirming the fact that the female body is soft and it is permeable, so it is susceptible to moral corruption. Gowon’s fiction on the libidinal woman is based on Biblical morality; the writer herself claims on her Facebook page that she is a devout Christian and her works tend to be didactic due to their religious and moral undertones. The sentiment expressed by the narrator in *The Adulteress*, is similar to that expressed five decades earlier by the narrator in Ekwensi’s *People of the City*, who describes Elina, the wife the protagonist Sango rejects for a libidinous modern woman, as an embodiment of purity and innocence because she was “brought up according to the laws of God and the Church...and looking forward to a life divine.” (quoted in Emenyonu; 1974).

### **African Women’s Bodies as Outhouses for Men**

But the writer as a reporter does not just stumble upon the figure of the sexualised modern girl as being scandalous; at the heart of this struggle is the figure of the writer as a voice of political and moral authority. In addition, some fictional male narrators in the digital age are

following what their precursors did in the print age, because they arguably want to lay claim to the body of African women as belonging to men.

Moreover, what several novels and short stories that touch on the figure of the libidinal modern girl show us is that in literature, African and European men share something in common – their use of sexual privilege as a means of asserting power and performing masculinity, while what African women sometimes lack in fiction is the ownership of their own bodies.

For examples, the narrator in Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966) tells us that white colonial administrators regularly slept with their West African female staff, and even at times, their young male domestic members of staff were not spared. Likewise in Kenya and the rest of the East African region, where Ngugi points out colonial officials regularly slept with their African maids as part of the perks of being white men in Africa and of being male, much to the anguish of their European wives who had to share their husbands with local women (see Azodo & Eke; 2007).

In this culture war against European men, several African fictional writers seek out libidinal women for condemnation in order to educate the reading public about the danger that these women pose to Africa's image. In the process, they seek to counter the image of savage and sexually-rampant unclean black women. And just as in the colonial state, men in the postcolonial era now represent authority and the figure of the libidinal woman is being used across these two eras as a gendered tool to protect male privileges and arguably as a weapon in the struggle between black men and their white counterparts.

In Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Weep Not, Child* (1962) the libidinal Kenyan women who slept with Italian prisoners of war (captured by the British during the Second World War), were depicted as traitors and also punished for sleeping with white men.



“The Italian prisoners who built the long tarmac road had left a name for themselves because some went about with black women and black women had white children. Only, the children by black mothers and Italian prisoners who were also white men were not “white” in the usual way. They were ugly and some grew up to have small wounds all over the body and especially around the mouth so that flies followed them at all times and at all places. Some people said that this was a punishment. Black people should not sleep with white men who ruled them and treated them badly” (5–6).

For the narrator in *Weep Not, Child*, the body of the libidinal African woman is a diseased body, whose only use is to serve as a vector that transmitted and infected the supposed racial superiority of Europeans. What we see in *Weep Not, Child* is the narrator using his authority as male to fight two wars – one against imperialism and the other against the libidinal woman who has refused to be the sole sexual ‘property’ of Kenyan men. In the process, the libidinal modern woman is without power, disgraced and her children inflicted with wounds that mark them out as permanent social outcasts. Likewise, in Cyprian Ekwensi’s *Jagua Nana*, the fashionable prostitute often refuses to take on non-African partners, making a statement that the black female body is reserved solely for black men. In Ekwensi’s *People of the City*, the fictional character of Beatrice who became the “hot stuff that Europeans are crazy about” left her British husband with whom she had three children, for Sango, the novel’s African male protagonist.

In addition, from these texts we see a problem of how to read two wars – one cultural and the other gendered, which became evident within colonial modernity and how these women are used within colonial modernity. The two are related but need not be conflated. So, for instance, the “libidinal” woman as “prostitute” becomes conflated with women in urban spaces--across Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria--but this is always in relation to a “presumed” rural woman or European woman (In Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child*, Kenyan men enjoyed their sexual

encounter with European prostitutes during the war, while their female counterparts who happened to be prostitutes suffered from a similar relationship with white men). But it gets even more complex, because certain "rural" women also become configured as "libidinal" in oblique ways. In some of turn of the twentieth century documents, for instance, a Gikuyu age-group made up entirely of men is labelled *kienjeku* (sores) and a few years later one made up of women is labelled *gatego* (syphilis). The implicit sexualisation of the first group is transformed into sexual pathology in the second, and carries within it traces of "libidinal" women. There is no clear sense of how to read this transformation, but one would argue we are seeing, in this moment, the libidinal becoming a process of meaning-making.

Through fictional texts we see the way in which the figure of the libidinal African woman is put to use within colonial modernity and through postcolonial discourses from the print to the internet age. It is not only males whom various fictional narrators try to warn about the danger that the libidinal modern girl may pose, the fictional modern woman is also sometimes deployed as an important element of causal stories directed at women. In the online short story *Her Friend's Father* (2010), we see that women are likewise meant to fear the libidinal modern woman. The protagonist is having an 'illicit' sexual relationship with the father of a young woman who she is supposed to be a close confidant of, and because of this betrayal she becomes a figure that men and women alike cannot trust. Similar caution to women about this figure is expressed in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* (1965), where the figure of the modern girl manifests in the character of Simi. The narrator tells us that "Even children knew of Simi! Wives knelt and prayed that their men might sin a hundred times with a hundred women, but may their erring feet never lead them to Simi of the slow eyelids." (121).

Literary representation on libidinal women highlights the way in which fiction may report on deviants, and how it has the potential to create and manipulate history in the process.

Punishment and societal revenge can be argued to be the ultimate trope of fictional narratives, especially those dealing with libidinal modern women. Therefore, just as the protagonist in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eleyinju, Eḡẹgbẹrun Oko L'Aiye* (1929) is inflicted with a terminal illness and the writer accepts that her impending demise is a well-deserved comeuppance, so, does the narrator in *Ashewos Anonymous* (2009) inform us that the founder of the Ashewos Anonymous group dies “less than a year after the inaugural meeting from an AIDS related illness.” By dying painfully, these two women across two different literary eras, paid the ultimate price for their sexual rebellion, and their afflictions serve as a warning to readers. From these and other stories, one can argue that fictional narratives on libidinal women often strike a chord with readers because these stories successfully paint a picture of devious, often money-hungry, as well as sex-hungry women, who are a threat to not just the institution of marriage but a threat to public health, safety and communal harmony. Thus the modern girl inhabits a diseased body, which tells us that she and other women like her are a potential danger to everybody. Yet again, the death of a deviant body symbolises not just comeuppance but the society avenging rebellion and winning the battle over morality.

These fictions are also insights into the nature of contemporary scandal. Britten (1988: 30) points out that in the “parallel universe of fiction, we can laugh at some of these issues that easily provoke anger, angst and frustration in the real world.” Literature analyses moral corruption and sometimes makes judgements, and in the case of stories posted on social networking sites and blogs, writers and their readers may even get the chance to make their own moral judgements. The comments from some online readers of fictions that are mentioned at the start of this chapter buttress this point. The ways and means in which many authors and fictional narrators intentionally surround the modern girl with sexual scandals reveal the way literature can become an additional tool (to the print and new media), with

which the society admonishes all non-compliant bodies by asserting piety over sexual recklessness.

The passion which the emerging postcolonial state has invested in attacking the figure of the libidinal modern girl as an embarrassment can be seen in the way the Nigerian Council of Churches and the Muslim Council of Nigeria, as well as the Nigerian government in 1963 refused to allow a film version of *Jagua Nana* to be made in Nigeria. Despite Ekwensi winning the 1968 Dag Hammarskjöld international prize in literature for *Jagua Nana*, the Nigerian Minister of Information at the time told the parliament in Lagos that: “In my considered opinion, therefore, the outside world should not get the impression that Nigeria is a country of loose women and unscrupulous politicians like those portrayed in the imaginary world wherein *Jagua Nana* is set.” (Emenyonu, 1974: 94).

### **The Modern Woman’s Quest for Love**

The discourse of love is also a popular theme that writers and their fictional narrators regularly associated with the modern girl. In several fictions, the modern girl is often represented as a danger to the idea of true love because she is sexually confident and because she can be strong minded. In addition, many of these writings ascribe immorality to her because it allows them to criticise certain aspects of modernity without blaming African men and society (L.M Thomas, 2009). Lynn M. Thomas’s (2009) study on the modern girl phenomenon in 1930s South Africa, suggests that narrators in the *Bantu World* magazine often stress female self-sacrifice and subservience. Her study can be read as echoing similar trends in other parts of Africa, including Nigeria and Kenya. In Ngugi’s *Weep Not, Child*, ‘good’ African women are expected to be faithful to their husbands and at the same time submit to men’s whims. In Soyinka’s *The Interpreters*, the fictional character of Simi, poses a

challenge to men not just because she is highly educated but because she is sexually confident. Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1991), gives us Esi, the female protagonist in the late 1980s Ghana, who was so frustrated by the contemporary expectation of female subservience and self-sacrifice that she concludes that there is no "fashion of loving" (166) that will meet the demand of modern African women like her.

There is a heightened engagement with the issues of romance, intimacy and sex, in the virtual landscape that is the internet. Additionally, in many fictional narratives, including some of the new online short stories and the novels that came before them, the modern girl often stands in the way of true love, and through this figure, writers allow their readers to make a distinction between 'true' and 'false' love. In *Ashewos Anonymous*, the narrator tells us that one of the libidinal women Chief (Mrs) Oladunjoye Akinpelu nee Harrison-Thomas, "was now on her sixth husband and had amassed a personal wealth of some 1.2 billion Nairas through various enterprises and divorce settlements." Added to the mix are the comments from readers of Odhiambo's *Her Friend's Father* (2010) and from those commenting on the fictional women of *Ashewos Anonymous* as well as comments sent to I.B Thomas with regard to the fictional character of Sẹgilọla, and those sent to various Nigerian newspapers with regard to the fictional Jagua Nana. These statements suggest that over the course of almost a century, many Africans have come to see modern girls as the antithesis to the spiritual connection and sustained affection that modernity ascribed to the idea of love (see also Lynn M. Thomas; 2007). Here, literature is telling us that the modern girl symbolises the ultimate betrayal of 'true' love because she uses her sexuality to deceive and exploit men.

New technologies and media have been central to debates on the modern girl and how the discourse of love can be interpreted through her because these mediums are suited to the graphical construction of lust. The printing press gave young Africans the avenue to discuss intimacy and romance not just through written words but also through glossy images and

cartoons in popular publications such as *Drum* and *Spear* magazines, as well the images on the cover of middlebrow novels in the Pacesetter series. Some online short stories on blogs and Facebook often include images and cartoons as additional illustration to fictional narratives. These images arguably help to create a distinction between what is 'true' love and what is 'false' love. False love may include alluring images on blogs as well as YouTube videos of young women tempting men, while images of true love often include that of man and a woman kissing or hugging underneath the cupid sign. These online portrayals of false love versus true love, as represented by fictional women in the twenty-first century echo similar view that was expressed by some writers several decades back. Lynn M. Thomas (2009: 49) quoted the South African writer Walter Nhlapo, as saying in 1936 that, “Modern girls look alike. They all wear the latest, in photo[s] they captivate you to lose you[r] head and heart.”

While commenting on the theme of romantic love common in the Onitsha Market literature, the literary scholar Emmanuel Obiechina (1973), argues that these texts are cultural agents that promoted a concept of romantic love grounded in Christianity as well as in the Euro-modern literature that was taught to writers when they were at school, and that this ideal could also be found in the novels and pamphlets imported from America and Britain. But the impact of colonial modernity was not just felt by many members of the old literary brigade, a few young writers likewise acknowledge the effect of western notion of romantic love on their craft. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie points out that before she discovered that there is an African worldview on the theme of love, she was besotted with the work of Enid Blyton. In an interview published in the online version of the UK broadsheet, *The Independent*, she says that while growing up in the University of Nigeria campus in Nsukka in the 1980s she devoured Blyton's tales of 1950s nuclear families in the English Home Counties. She soon

started writing her own fictional narratives, with custom-made covers and middle-class white characters, who are "exactly like Enid Blyton's" (Christina Patterson, 18 August 2006).

Like Adichie, Whitman acknowledges the impact of the Euro-modern notion of love on her creative writing:

"I have always been intrigued by the principle of unconditional love. When I started reading the Mills and Boon Romance novels as a young adult, their stories had a big influence on me and my writing. My imagined and written stories changed from adventures to romance. So now that I decided on full time writing, I was moved to go back to that genre." (Joseph Omotayo, 20 February 2011).

In the digital age, the image of the modern girl is not only represented through fictional characters but female writers are positioning themselves as symbols of modernity and using their personal lives to illustrate how the idea of romantic love cannot be separated from modern lifestyle. Moreover, Barber argues that new technologies provide new avenues to express intimacy and new forums to discuss romance along with the benefits and dangers that come with it (see Karin Barber 1997 & 2006).

From Whitman's Facebook advice columns and fictions, one can argue that the message of self-sacrifice along with the Bible-infused concept of "unconditional love" that colonial modernity preaches to women and expects from them towards men, has filtered through to young women in the social networking space. Whitman's personal life also reflects this; she is a stay-at-home mother who points out on her Facebook profile that she would not mind her husband taking on lovers. She has published two novels on romantic love; *A Heart to Mend* (2011) and her current novel *A Love Rekindled* (2011), in addition to dozens of short stories and poems on the subject. Her fictions regularly echo the tips on romance that she gives to

her fans; that the quest for true love is a sacrifice that young women must be ready to make and that fits within that concept of romantic love.

Like some members of the older generation, today's young writers in the online space are pre-occupied with how modern women should behave in this age. Within and outside of their fictional works, we regularly see them intervening in the life of their readers by providing didactic messages. This is similar to what many pamphlet and middlebrow writers did across the continent in the print medium.

On her Facebook fan page, the writer Myne Whitman regularly provides instructions and advice to female and male readers alike on how they should behave in romantic relationships. In a post titled '*Debate Tuesday – Connecting With an Ex* on Facebook' (Tuesday, 07 September 2010), she advises young women on how to stay faithful to their boyfriends while using social network.

“Some people say they will never add their boyfriends as Facebook friends in the first place, and will [their status] will remain single until they are married, I understand not broadcasting that you're in a relationship which may end up as transient, but not adding the person as a friend doesn't really sound realistic. Others say they will remove those friends once they become exes. Sounds more doable, at the same time, you may come across as churlish and bitter and who wants to be the one who is worse off by a break up?...Of course, one part of my mind expects that the reconnections [with an ex] will stay superficial. But what if it doesn't? What if old embers burst back into flame during the course of a cursory Facebook chat? What if you open the door to the kind of ex that will leave you hurtful messages that can be misconstrued by those reading? You know the kind of suggestive insinuations that can even set off the person you're now with.”



In another Facebook post titled *Debate Tuesday – Who is a Feminist* (Tuesday, 14 September 2010, Whitman points out that “I think it’s a man world. At this stage in my life, I have come to accept it.”

What some young middle class writers like Whitman are postulating arguably represents a continuation of a discourse centred on 'civilised' sexual decorum for modern women versus the depravity of today's *Jagua Nanas* - that is, the sexual behaviour of the African lower class. The racialised discourse of the modern girl as libidinal and the didactic narratives on modern women in the digital space arguably emanate from colonial modernity, which Stoler reminds us is "about the importation of [the European] middle class sensibilities and the making of them." (99).

By surrounding the image of the modern girl with ideas of unconditional love and self-sacrifice, one can argue that female writers are trying to rescue the modern girl from a portrayal that sees her as immoral, corrupt and unbalanced. In some of these new online works, modern women are often portrayed as safe and godly, and as women who believe in a world ruled by men. The modern girl is thus no longer libidinal, and in the process she becomes the docile one-man character that many men have always wanted her to be.

Furthermore, in the quest to rescue the image of modern women, other African writers have sought to fight their own gender war, by portraying African men as unromantic, unemotional, domineering and often unable to adapt to the modern age - the ultimate symbols of patriarchal men. While several male writers have used the fictional image of the modern girl to attack all types of women who have tried to assert their sexual and financial independence, some female writers have tried to turn the tables by painting men in fictional narratives as cruel and unfeeling, and modern women as victims of men.

In *When Love is Gone* (2010) a short story published in [thenewblackmagazine.com](http://thenewblackmagazine.com), Whitman's narrator creates an image of the emotional sacrifice that modern women make in their quest for true love. The protagonist had met the man she thought would be the 'love of her life' whilst at university, and like a scene out of a Mills & Boon novel that Whitman says she adores, the protagonist begins a whirlwind romance, throwing everything into the relationship and depending on the man for emotional and financial security. And like many unfeeling fictional African male characters, it was not long before we are told that the man not only dumped the protagonist but that he lied about his reason for doing so. The protagonist then becomes an emotional wreck and goes as far as stalking her former boyfriend on Facebook.

In a blog post on Gnaija.net, titled "*Nigerian Men Are Both Unromantic and Unemotional... Who Says I Am Wrong?*" Whitman points out:

"I had a discussion with a friend recently [on](#) writing romance set in Nigeria and she believes it is highly unrealistic. I thought it was because of the western/African dichotomy in romance where a few people I met during my readings mentioned that most Nigerians find it hard to say I love you and would rarely give flowers and such... But where exactly does it come from this 'Nigerian men are unemotional?' [Is](#) it from the culture and upbringing or what? Does being unemotional mean they feel nothing for the women they're with or they hide it and prefer not to voice it out? Also we should be bear in mind that emotions are not just about love and affection, anger is also an emotion. How come our men are comfortable showing that side of them to the extent of Domestic Violence but find it hard to be more sensitive when it comes to relationships?"

These portrayals speak to some female writers' attempt to paint a totally different image of the modern girl - not as the soul-less, manipulative character that many male narrators have portrayed her but as a victim of unromantic and patriarchal men. In an attempt to write the modern girl's story, some writers have ended up of portraying modern women as emotionally weak and ineffective individuals who will sacrifice everything to find the ideal husband. In the process, these fictional women can embody the idea of 'true love'. The Mills & Boon's concept of the benevolent prince charming has been transported into Africa's urban landscapes with fictional female characters who seem incapable of being able to succeed without men, and who often emotionally and financially rely on men or God in order survive.

The editor of the Kenya literature blog Storymoja, recognises this deficiency, when she argues:

“Firstly, ideas of what romance novels should be, are marred by the Mills & Boons, Harlequins and blah blah blahs of this world. No, not one Kenyan teen girl who loved reading and who passed through high school was left ungrazed by those cheesy books with bare-chested male models on the cover. The focus of most pulp fiction romance novels is on the physical, with a little mystery, sometimes an overdose of mystery. It doesn't feel right in the Kenyan context. Not quite. Secondly, writers tend to over-think the 'reality'. For the past several decades, the reputation of the Kenyan man has been pegged into the 'not romantic, not chivalrous, not kind to women, not honest' category...The Kenyan woman's reputation has also been shredded to pieces, leaving the gold digger option vs. the spoilt rich girl option.” (Storymoja, 7 February 2011).

The willingness to instruct and monitor within and outside of fiction in the online writing space brings up the argument that literature can serve as another mode of regulating the bodies of modern African women. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*,

Foucault (1977) argues that ordinary citizens participate in monitoring each other, and by so doing, are unwittingly doing the bidding of the modern state. The presence of such mechanisms in books and online fictions on modern women in which some writers intervene either as ‘culture police’ or as rescuers of the modern girl’s image, speaks to the way in which the state and the Church through their citizens and congregations, monitor and try to control the sexual life of young women.

And when writers and readers support the ‘anti-libidinization’ of the modern girl, we see the process of self-repression, whereby ordinary citizens put themselves in what Foucault sees as sexual prison, because they have become sexual disciplinarians. From a Foucauldian point of view, not only is control exercised via the state and the religious class’s knowledge of individuals; there is also control via individuals’ knowledge of themselves. Individuals internalize the norms laid down by the society are controlled not only as objects of disciplines but also as self-scrutinizing and self-forming subjects.

## CHAPTER SIX

### REPRESENTATION OF THE LIBIDINAL ECONOMY IN A NEW MEDIA AGE

The trope of the prostitute has become a common feature of modern African literature. The fixation with this figure continues in the writing of some members of the current generation using the online space to analyse the life of the African prostitute. So, this chapter will be about the libidinal economy, the history of representation of sex work in African literature, and the differences and similarities in these representations between young writers in a digital age and the generations that came before them.

This chapter will also be arguing that literature shows us that prostitution (or sex work) is both a form of capitalist exploitation within the concept of globalisation as well as a form of female empowerment when we look at the way in which modernity's dictated gender performances are being disrupted by these women. So this is about the sexual market and how the dynamic of power is played out within libidinal economic exchange, of which the prostitute or the sex worker is an iconic figure.

In addition, it is suffice to say that the choice of terminology— between prostitution and commercial sex work — is problematic because of the different connotations given to them and their usage by academics. While the term 'prostitution' is used by those focused on materialism, the term 'sex work' is used by those who emphasise the analogous nature of commercial sex and other commercial activities.( See Laurie Shrage, 1994: 122). This chapter will be using the two terminologies and interchanging them, fully aware that the term 'prostitution' is becoming politically incorrect as it carries the history of stigma and the history of spectrality surrounding the figure of the public sex worker, whereas the term 'sex work' may be seen as representing issues of agency, labour and commercial enterprise.

In the previous chapter, we see I.B Thomas (like many African writers after him) seeking to champion what he perceives as the corruption of the African mores in his representation of Sẹgilọla. The writer and his fictional narrator in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eleyinju, Eḡeḡberun Ọkọ L' Aiye* (1929), regularly condemn women who use their bodies as financial commodities, and both see prostitution as one of the negative impacts of colonial modernity.

However, the fictional character of Sẹgilọla is not naïve; the libidinal modern woman sees through this male hypocrisy and she does not necessarily believe that her actions are a disruption of cultural values or an assault on tradition. As a matter of fact, she uses tradition and history to justify her supposed excesses by reminding us that:

"L'aiye la ti ba

L'aiye la ti ba

Ka d'ọkọ, ka yan ale

Ka yan ale, la ti ba,

Ko ẹ l'ori wa ! !" (90).

(Trans: We inherited it/ we inherited it/ to have a husband, and have lovers/ to have lovers, is our heritage/ it did not start in our time.)

While the victimization of libidinal modern African women arguably came out of colonial modernity, their existence predated the colonial encounter. One can also argue that the modern girl knows that behind the constant condemnation of her way of life, lies fear. Fear that her behaviour jeopardizes masculine privileges. Fear that her sexual bravado will reveal male sexual failing; that her courage and overt sexuality may trigger the ebbing away of power that has long been invested in the African male; and of course, that her sexual energy will have a negative impact on the state. This position is supported by some of the members

of the new generation of African writers. For example, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2008) argues that the vilification of libidinal women in the twenty-first century is about hypocrisy, and not sex. She points out that this is:

“about societies for whom women are scapegoats, and Nigeria is only one example. The country is immoral, and we must legislate morality by imprisoning women in miniskirts. (Most Nigerians use ‘immoral’ to mean sexual. They rarely use the word to refer to real immorality: institutional corruption.”

Adichie argues further:

“This Judaeo-Christian-Islamic notion of controlling the female temptress so as to save the helpless male dehumanises women and insults the dignity of men since it assumes that men are incapable of restraint at the sight of a woman’s flesh.”

Adichie’s view on sexual immorality and on why the postcolonial state regularly seeks to legalise morality likewise echoes the sentiment expressed decades earlier by the speaker in Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Malaya*:

“You Presidents, Ministers,  
Liberators of Africa,  
You heroes,  
You who defeated colonialism  
And imperialism,  
True sons of Africa  
Brave fighters against  
Corruption and decay,  
You revolutionaries. . .

Where are the advisors

The experts and mercenaries?

Can we not free Africa

From this one pest?"

(p'Bitek 1971: 140).

Like Adichie, the speaker in this poem mocks powerful men who control the society and who want to ban prostitution while also making use of the sexual services that prostitutes provide. For the speaker, the prostitute does not pose a problem for Africa rather it is the members of the political class who are the problem. In this poem, the speaker, like the fictional characters of Sẹgilọla, and like the real-life literary figure of Adichie, is commenting on the history of hypocrisy surrounding the libidinal economy in postcolonial Africa.

### **Euro-modernity and the History of Literary Representation of the Libidinal**

Additionally, what Sẹgilọla is telling us in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eleyinju, Eḷegberun Oko L'Aiye* (1929) is that the sexualised African female is nothing new. The acts of taking on several lovers and exchanging sex for money are steeped in tradition and do not connote savagery or irresponsibility in the way in which modernity has sought to define such behaviours. Sẹgilọla is arguably right, as it is worthwhile to point out that the figure of the libidinal woman is not only limited to modern Africa as Sẹgilọla has argued, as a matter of fact, such figures exist in several traditions across the world.

In Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, we see an example of this figure in the literature of the middle Ages, as represented by *The Wife of Bath*, who is one of the fictional characters in the *Knight's Tale*. Unlike the submissive figure of the village girl Griselda, the Wife of Bath maintains that wives should dominate their husbands, and she enforces this



belief by narrating her own lifestyle, which she illustrates through the story of King Arthur who learned that, "Women desire to have sovereyntee/ As wel over hir housbond as hir love/ And for to been in maistre him above" (1038-40). *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* is an interesting example of a woman trying to free herself from being dominated by men and society by using her sexuality as a means of power. The Wife of Bath is a business woman who "[is] a bit deaf/ [And] so skilled a clothmaker, that she outdistanced/ Even the weavers of Ypres and Ghent" (Chaucer 12). She "is a tough woman with a mind of her own and is not afraid to speak it" ("Role"). During her prologue, the Wife of Bath proudly proclaims that she has been married five times, and she "cites the Bible and deems that God 'bade us expressly to increase and multiply,'" professing her opinion on female sexuality. Chaucer's narrator also tells us that the Wife of Bath wants to dominate a marriage, have control over the economics, have control over sexual pleasure, and manipulate the relationship to her liking. (Chaucer 1400, 1951 & 1977).

Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* is important to our understanding of the figure of the libidinal woman and the role she plays in our understanding of the history of the libidinal economy, because as a piece of canonical (literary) text, *The Canterbury Tales* has a strong connection to the emergency of Euro-modern idea on sexuality and how this concept spread and became the norm throughout the world. Enrique Dussel (1998) points out that Euro-modernity began in the Middle Ages, and this is an era that writings such as *The Canterbury Tales* began to emerge. From the Middle Ages to the colonial years, literature played an important role in furthering the agenda of Euro-modernity because it has consistently placed Europe at the centre of sexual discourses and *The Wife of Bath* represents the genesis of modernity's articulation of the libidinal economy. The discipline that the powerful clergymen in Chaucer's tale tried to impose on the Wife of Bath and on medieval Britain is arguably the type of discipline that European administrators and missionaries, who trained many members

of the older generation of African writers, brought to Africa. Karin Barber (2007: 151-52) argues that the beginning of print culture in Africa was “not as the acquisition of a technical skill but as the subjection to, and internalisation of, discipline... which instilled in them [Africans] a cultured appreciation of great literature, but which in their own [African] eyes prepared them for participation in new colonial (and anti-colonial) leadership roles.” We can therefore see how texts such as *The Canterbury Tales*, which is seen as great literature, influenced an understanding of the nature of the libidinal economy and the figure of the libidinal woman.

While Oyewumi (1997) is arguably pointing to an egalitarian African society before the colonial encounter, other academic studies are arguing against the idea of an innocent pre-colonial Africa, one in which there were no prostitutes and African men and women are free to enjoy similar sexual lifestyles. Tobias Green's (2012) important work on African-European encounter on the West African coastline in the Middle Ages shows us that this may not be the case. Looking at written and oral historical record, Green suggests in several mediaeval African societies, women were often used as sexual commodities between local and foreign merchants. For example, the merchants of Gambia's Madinka and traders from Casamance often offer African women as sex workers to fellow European and African traders. Green points out that records showed that young women were also offering sex to European merchants as far back as the fifteenth century on the West African coast. In the coastal town of Elmina, in today's Ghana, the French trader Eustache de la Fosse was reported to be aghast when a young African woman asked him if he wanted "choque-choque". (106).

Moreover, an examination of African literature from the print to the online era suggests that we cannot look at the figure of the sex worker without talking about the libidinal economy. What is the ‘libidinal economy’ in the context of Africa and its literature? What does African

literature published in the new media space as well as literature published previously in print tell us about what drives women into prostitution and what makes men pay for sex? We can approach these questions indirectly by looking at two quotes from two different pieces of fiction that have made the connection between money and libido. The first example comes from the words of the narrator in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*:

"Love? ...Love? ...Love is not safe, my lady Silk, love is dangerous. It is deceitfully sweet like the wine from a fresh palm tree at dawn. Love is fine for singing about love and love songs are good to listen to, sometimes even to dance to. But when we need to count on human strength, and when we have to count pennies for food for our stomachs and clothes for our backs, love is nothing." (2004: 51).

The other quote comes from the fictional blog *Nairobi Nights*, in which a person with the pseudonym Sue and who is writing as a prostitute in the suburbs of Nairobi tells us that:

"Someone says my Vagina smells. He is wrong. I value and take care very good of it. How could I ignore the organ that keeps the rest of me alive by generating income to stop me from starving? ... Men pay for sex with a prostitute as if paying for a commodity. But my ideal situation would be if they paid for the service the same way one pays for a work of art. Not necessarily a Dali or Wanyu Brush but an obscure artist whose abstract painting pierces the soul of the buyer. If that was the case I would have the same basis as great artists to charge high prices; not for the aesthetics of the art but for the inexplicable effect a work has on the soul. But the ideal is only a fantasy I dream of, as I live through a very different reality." (Episode 24: My Vagina Says Something).

Across two different literary formats - the book and the online - these two narrators incisively articulate the condition of the libidinal economy in contemporary Africa. Love is an

emotional element which may not be connected to the reality of daily life and so love is perhaps not enough, as money represents the tangible reality of contemporary life. The vagina is a tool for making money, and like any other money-spinning machine, it must be cleaned, freshened and looked after by the libidinal woman. Here, we see how money is intractably linked to the libidinal market, with love an element that has no usefulness for those working in the sex trade.

David Bennett (2009: 93) argues that “the association of libidinal with monetary spending has a long history”, and perhaps, Bennett is right, the constant reference to money and the libido, which the fictional Nairobi prostitute makes in her blog posts reflects the obsession between spending and money that we see most fictional characters (discussed in the previous chapter) make. Money and the trope of the prostitute both arguably constitute a genre when we talk about African literature. By building on emerging fictional narratives, this chapter will show that not only can women across social classes be said to be sex workers or prostitutes, but they also debunk the coy, tacit relativist assumption that the libidinal woman as sex worker is a prodigious spender, who does not contribute meaningfully to the economy of the postcolonial state.

The term “Ashewo” (or ‘money changer’) as previously discussed is one that has been ascribed to prostitutes and sexualised women alike in modern Nigeria. In Kenya, like most of East Africa, the term ‘Malaya’ is often used to describe prostitute. Both are terminologies that arguably came out of colonial modernity discourse. In a similar fashion in Europe, Bennett (2009: 93) points out that the word ‘purse’ might have connoted “either scrotum or vagina and ‘spending’ either seminal or vaginal fluid since the late sixteenth century.”

Libido connotes the powerful human sexual urges and the way in which our sexual instincts are expressed, but access to libidinal satisfaction is not equitably distributed. Here, I am

thinking through to the economic law of demand and supply. Most people have libidinal urges, but some have no resources to obtain sexual satisfaction, which can either be money, power, good looks or other factors. Despite the history of attack on the figure of the libidinal woman, literature shows us that prostitution has survived because it feeds on a very basic human libidinal need and because it is well connected to the agenda of capitalism and globalisation. The online fictional character of Sue, the Nairobi prostitute describes the way she looks after her vagina and herself because she believes that cleanliness enhances the sexual services that she provides. Like any business, the pricing of commodities is a function of many factors but the key is the cost of production. For a prostitute, the cost of production therefore may be in the form of buying clothes, having a bikini wax, buying sexy dresses, taking medical tests or providing unusual sexual demands. Sue is therefore articulating a different view with regard to prostitution, by looking at it from a purely business angle.

Like many of the libidinal modern women we have previously looked at, the Wife of Bath flouted chastity and exulted that she had "had her world as in her time". The way in which most of the male characters, especially the clergymen attacked her reflect the subsequent attacks and energy expended on suppressing libidinal African women during the colonial years and in the current postcolonial decades. One can also argue that some of the fictional libidinal figures that many African writers have created across the online and print mediums are women who represented the (sexual) thinking of their time – including views that supported the Euro-modernist approach to the discourse of prostitution. For example, some European writers used libidinal women, especially prostitutes, to accentuate fear that the ruling classes would be contaminated – in their morals, their health and their racial stock by prostitutes, including prostitutes in the colonial world. In the process they wanted to protect white male privilege over white women and people of other races. These included D.H.

Lawrence who condemned pornography as a being responsible for masturbation and masturbation as a criminal wastage of libido (See Bennett, 2009).

The French writer Georges Bataille in *L'Erotisme* (1957) not only proclaimed that the woman (the prostitute) must make herself available to men (thereby stressing male domination over libidinal women) but Bataille argued that the prostitute is a drain on capitalism and that libertinism is a self-wasting of energy that could have been better invested in the capitalist economy. While subscribing to Hegel's assertion that Europeans were justified to enslave Africa and that prostitution represents primitive urges typical of "ethnology's good savage, slightly libidinalised" (see Jean-Francois Lyotard, 1974 & 1993: 106). Bataille's text alludes to the fact the prostitute is the ultimate symbol of spendthrift eroticism, who is devoted to a life of sin and whose resolve to break the taboos surrounding sexuality may lead to a life of financial recklessness.

So Bataille may have not only reinforced the notion that women belong to men but he is also probably suggesting that sexual profligacy is anathema to civilised mannerism. Prostitution therefore becomes a metaphor for savagery and primitivism, which can be linked to colonial modernity's attitude to Africa. The metaphor of the prostitute as an irrational and barbaric person is what much of African writing that came out in print also bought into, with several writers using fictional characters to make similar connections between libidinal women and financial recklessness.

In Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954: 68) the narrator tells us that the reason that the most sophisticated and sensual character in the novel Beatrice I, came from Enugu to Lagos is "high life! Cars, servants, high-class foods, decent clothes, luxurious living. Since she could not earn the high life herself, she must obtain it by attachment to someone who could."

We see similar opinion expressed in the representation of Jagua Nana in the novel of the same name:

“She was bored. She was Jagwa, and the man was not Jagwa-ful. He never took her to parties, and would not dress well... In no way did these ideas of living attract her.” (179.)

While Jagua Nana informs us that through the libidinal economy “I wan’ to become proper merchant princess. I going to buy me own shop, and lorry and employ me own drive. I goin’ to face dis business serious,” she could not, however, realise this ambition in Lagos. In the end, the writer reinforces the Victorian era stereotype of the prostitute as a spendthrift who is unable to manage business profitably. The narrator in *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḷeyinju, Eḷegberun Oko L’Aiye* (1929), informs us several times that the libidinal protagonist who gained a lot of material goods from a series of male lovers ended up penniless because of her sexual waywardness. So we see that in the modernist era, African literature tells us that when it comes to the figure of the prostitute, her reckless spending of immoral earnings, her sapping of men’s libido (energy that could have been use on profitable aspects of the national economy) and the wastage of her own libido led to her downfall. So, the libidinal economy like the Bible ended up voicing the same view on libidinal women, which is that the wages of immorality is death. And from this perspective we can argue that many European and African writers, coming from a Euro-modernist worldview, have used literature to depict men as thinkers, and the female prostitute as an embodiment of the recklessness of the female sex.

However, a reading of some of the online literature by some new African voices, reveals that the long-held image of the prostitute as a wasteful spender may not fully represent the figure of the prostitute. In *Ashewos Anonymous* (2009), the narrator said this about one of the fictional characters:

“Chief (Mrs) Oladunjoye Akinpelu nee Harrison-Thomas, the socialite, the bon vivant, the collector of men, the lover of all things fiscal, and without much doubt the greatest fornicator of all time. She was now on her sixth husband and had amassed a personal wealth of some 1.2 billion Nairas through various enterprises and divorce settlements. Her primary source of income remained her very successful brothel franchise which had started out as a modest concern in her boys-quarters in Ilupeju. Over the years it had grown into a national franchise and now boasted no less than 49 depots across the country. There were only four states in Nigeria that she did not have at least one brothel and development plans were already at an advanced stage. She had once bragged that if Mr. Biggs was the biggest franchise in Nigeria, then her brothels were a close second.”

Similarly, in Chika Unigwe’s online piece *Dreams* (2004), the protagonist tells us about how she is using money made from sex work, especially money earned from a particular male client:

“He gives you enough money to pay your house-rent for two months. The money helps deshy you and soon, you are able to chuck the shyness in a bin where it mildews. As the man with the sandpaper hands whispers into your ears, you close your nose to the stench of his breath (it smells like the raw fish stand of the local Kenyatta market), and you count your blessings: your daughters are in a private school, your mother is being taken good care of, and your retirement plans are already in motion. You will be the owner of the biggest bakery in Enugu. You can already see the bakery, a white bungalow with "Dream Bread" emblazoned in red, a huge neon light lighting it up, its fame spreading from Enugu to Onitsha.”

So we see that instead of being an irresponsible spender, the African prostitute, especially the working class sex worker, has profit in mind and she has a plan on how best to invest her



earnings. If she spends on things like beautiful clothes, perfumes and jewellery, it is probably because those things are parts of the cost of production in her line of business, as they are likely to enhance her beauty and to attract potential customers. What some members of a new generation of African writer are showing us in the online space is that the figure of the prostitute is perhaps that of a savvy-spender and a worker who in her own way is contributing to the economy of the postcolonial state.

### **The Nature of Sex Work in the Twenty-first Century**

Much of Chika Unigwe's online writing is devoted to the libidinal economy through the eyes of fictional Nigerian prostitutes, many of them providing services to men, some of whom could not meet some of the aforementioned criteria for satisfying their libidinal urges with women they did not have to pay. The protagonist in Unigwe's *Borrowed Smile* (2005) recounts how she is supplying these sexual demands: "In time, you learn to be different things to different men. A slave. A mistress. A dog... You are a hit with the clients and you make money. More money than you had ever dreamed possible for one person to own."

The protagonist comes from a poor Nigerian family in the city of Enugu in Eastern Nigeria. At just sixteen years old, she met a man called Bob, who told her he wanted to take her to Europe, away from poverty, to "places close to the sky. Way beyond this environment riddled with smell of dead and decaying things... 'I will send you to school' he whispers like he was saying a prayer... you do not want to question how you will enter school with no prior education."

This quote from *Borrowed Smile* reflects some of the conditions under which many young African women enter the sex trade – poverty and the need to keep body and soul together. What writers are probably trying to represent in their stories is the way in which the

increasing level of poverty on the continent - especially since the introduction of the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) in the late 1980s - is driving many young women to prostitution. The poverty that surrounds the protagonist in *Borrowed Smile* in Enugu, is similar to the condition in which we found another protagonist in the online fiction *Dreams* (2004). In this story, the narrator depicts what led into the young protagonist selling her body for money:

"You cannot get a job because you have no qualifications. You do not have even a standard six certificate. Your mother always says that all a woman needs is a generous husband. She is wrong. A woman needs more than that. She needs generous in-laws too. Above that, she needs an education, a job, independence. These are what you want for your daughters. Your dream for them."

In Muthoni Garland's *Odour of Fate* (2008) published on the Storymoja blog, we are told that the Kenyan prostitute Anastasia came from similar background as most of the women in Unigwe's online stories, with the narrator informing us that "She had grown up in the slums of Nairobi, born of parents too poor to keep their children in school. Her own children were burnt in a fire set by a jealous lover, and her family disowned her for turning to prostitution."

On one hand, what these stories also reveal is that many young women who go into prostitution may have done so because they were not educated by poor parents who would rather educate a boy than a girl and if we compare the life of the sex worker in Unigwe's *Dreams* (2003) and that of Anastasia, the prostitute from Mombasa, Kenya, in the online short story *The Odour* (2004), we can argue that poverty and lack of education may be two of the key reasons many young African sex workers are operating within the libidinal economy.

On the other hand, academic scholarship on the sex trade in Africa, such as that of Luise White (1990), has also shown that the business of prostitution enables poor African women to gain an economic foothold in their communities. This is true for some of the fictional characters in Unigwe and Muthoni Garland's online short stories, because for them, prostitution becomes a way out of being owned by a husband. For other fictional characters, the sex trade not only allows a certain degree of freedom, it also enables them to be economically mobile. In addition, these fictional narratives suggest that prostitution, which was once stigmatised in many Nigerian and Kenyan societies, is no longer viewed as an abomination by many impoverished parents. In some of Unigwe's online short stories, we see parents encouraging their daughters to go into prostitution in Africa and in Western Europe, because prostitution may be a better source of income than the daily grind of life in many Nigerian cities and towns. Unigwe's narrators often reveal that although some of these young women's parents were initially ambivalent about them going to Europe, they changed their minds when these women brought back money and material goods to Nigeria, despite the fact that they know that these women work as prostitutes in Europe.

While several members of the older generation of writers used literature to paint the prostitute as a renegade figure, some of the emerging voices in the online space are suggesting that she is instead a capitalist to the core. New narratives point to the fact that the prostitute is as canny and shrewd in her approach to her trade as does a businessman in a much more formal part of the business sector. The African prostitute is therefore not fully an agent of libidinal subversion of capitalism because her business acumen often seems to mimic that of the mainstream economy.

Some of the emerging voices in the online writing space are also building on some of the insights that writers such as Ekwensi and p'Bitek gave several decades ago with regard to the

sex trade, especially when it comes to the other key fictional figures – that of the pimp and the brothel Madam. These are the middlemen and women who house and negotiate with the prostitute's clients on behalf of the prostitute herself. Perhaps one of the earliest representations of the pimp figure in African literature is the character of Mr Williams, the European pimp who took young women across the Nigerian border to foreign clients in Ekwensi's novella *When Love Whispers* (1948). What Ekwensi arguably did at the time is to portray the emergence of pimps on the West African coast during and after the Second World War. According to Emmanuel Akyeampong (1997), examples of real-life pimps in the region at the time included the 'pilot boys' of Sekondi-Takoradi, who were known to bring West African men to British soldiers serving in the area. In Chika Unigwe's online stories, the present day's versions of the pilot boys are the likes of Bob in *Borrowed Smile*, and Kunle in *Anonymous*.

These Madams and pimps are often calculative, cold and manipulative. Online literature depicts them as seducers, abusers and parent-figures, combined together. In many online stories, we get an insight into the modus operandi of the pimp figure - the African men who lure young African women into Europe and who on getting to Europe quickly cross the line between friends and lovers of these young women to asserting themselves as their pimps. The narrative often starts like this; the pimp starts a relationship with vulnerable young women who are desperate to escape from poverty and come to Europe or North America. On getting to the West, the pimp then forces them into prostitution, and because most of these women arrived on fake passports, they become reliant on the pimp in order to avoid deportation back to Africa as they have to work so as to pay off the debt they owe to their pimps and Madams.

## The Prostitute as a Tormented Figure

One area that the representation of the prostitute in some online fictional narratives mimics the Euro-modernist representation of the print era is in the portrayal of the prostitute's childhood. This can often be seen as mirroring Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory on the mind of the prostitute. Here, this thesis is thinking through to the trope of the female prostitute as a tormented child and how psychoanalysis can be linked to the theoretical concepts and the African literature that came out of the modernist era. In the earlier part of the last century, the Anglo-Austrian Sigmund Freud, who is often referred to as the father of psychoanalysis developed a psychoanalytic theory that linked economic model to the human psyche, especially that of repressed desire. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* translated by James Strachey (1909 & 1962) he argued that female prostitutes have infantile sexuality, are likely to suffer from depression and have a low self-esteem due to their inability to fully develop through the psychosexual stages of development, resulting in unresolved internal and external conflicts, many of which have to do with the child's relationship with her parents. Freud believed that prostitutes were psychologically immature, suffering from neurosis or fixated in an early stage of development.

For Freud, prostitutes exploit their innate sexual perversion because the superego is undeveloped resulting in the woman having an 'uncivilised' sexual attitude. In *Civilisation and its Discontent* (1930) he expounded further on this theory by arguing that "Since man does not have unlimited disposal, he has to accomplish his tasks by making an expedient distribution of his libido." (55). What is poignant about Freud's scholarship on the trope of the female prostitute is his assertion that prostitutes represent for males the forbidden love they have for their mothers – that is a traumatic Oedipus complex - in which a female gives herself to anybody because she has been rejected by her father and that the prostitute is being

socially irresponsible for not controlling every woman's subconscious urge to perversion and prostitution.

Freud's theory may have backed up the modernist era's argument that prostitution like masturbation is a drain of economic energy in the way that Jagua Nana, Sègìlòla and several fictional African female prostitutes were portrayed but his position on the prostitute as having an abusive childhood is of interest to this thesis. Unlike much of the creative writings that came out in print, some members of the new generation of writers are borrowing from the Freudian concept in their portrayal of fictional prostitutes. For example, in *Ashewos Anonymous* (2009), the character Funke Okunrinoletemilorun, who was founder of this society, is described by the narrator as: "a young lady with genuine sexual neuroses. At the last count she had slept with no less than 127 men, not including the okada driver that would drop her later that evening."

Here, the prostitute suffers from what Freud alludes to as the neurotic prostitute – the woman who will do anything to get attention. As children, both the protagonist in Unigwe's *Borrowed Smile* and Anastasia the Mombasa prostitute in Garland's *Odour of Fate*, had an uneasy relationship with their parents, and the narrators in both stories seem to be alluding that these may have had an impact on their lives as adults. The narrator in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2006 & 2011) informs us that the middle class Ama, one of the fictional African prostitutes working in Antwerp, was kicked out of her home in Nigeria for revealing that her saintly-seeming stepfather, assistant pastor at the Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahweh, had been raping her since she was 8 years old. So again, the action of paedophile led a young woman to sex work, thus confirming Freud's hypothesis on the figure of the prostitute.

While much of the writing on the trope of the prostitute by the older generation tends to vilify sex workers, much of the new work online such as those of Unigwe, seeks to educate readers and politicians about the plight facing sex workers within the international sex trade and the danger and exploitation that most of these young women face. From Unigwe's fictions, one can argue that the typical African prostitute working in Europe and on the continent is an adolescent who has survived abuse, has been forced into prostitution to feed herself and her family, and now has no way of surviving except by selling sexual favours. These fictional characters' traumatic childhood arguably contributed to their reliance on abusive parental-figures like Bob in *Borrowed Smile* and the European expatriate in *Odour Of Fate*. As a matter of fact, both Garland and Unigwe paint their fictional prostitutes as women suffering from depression and low self-esteem, and these afflictions further make them vulnerable to abusive men and tragic relationships.

As argued in the introduction to this thesis, since African literature in the online writing space often reflects the news cycle, we see several short stories becoming the second draft of twenty-first century's sexual history, the first perhaps, being journalism. Online works such as that of Chika Unigwe, which analyses the figure of the African prostitute, shows the way in which African literature contributes to knowledge already provided by the news media. According to studies by various agencies of the United Nations, human trafficking is now the third largest and fastest growing criminal industry in the world; almost two million young people are being exploited in the global sex trade; these studies suggest that sex is the most common reason for human trafficking and that trafficking exists in almost every country of the world. (Quoted from the Body Shop website - <http://www.thebodyshop-usa.com/sex-trafficking-stories.aspx> ). By building on academic and journalistic investigations, African literature shows us that human trafficking and sexual slavery are not myths but reality.

In Sefi Atta's online fiction *Glory* (2008), the narrator tells us about desperate young Nigerian women hanging out in Lagos hotels looking for a way out to Europe:

"They could easily pass for proper elite. What gave them away were the crooked-legged walks they acquired from parading up and down the diplomatic district. Glory called them *va bene*, not *ashawo*, as everyone else called them. So many of them ended up in Rome."

These fictional writings personalize the news stories that are being told across new media and academic platforms because they serve as supporting evidence to investigations on the evil of sex trafficking, especially that of vulnerable women from the non-West who are often voiceless as many of them have no legal papers and therefore cannot go to court or approach the authority in order to seek justice for the crime committed against them. These writings also highlight the plights of trafficked African women and they contribute to raising awareness of trafficked women of all races, who become part of the global sex trade and who are likewise exploited by market forces. Unigwe regularly gives interviews in media forums such as *The Guardian* (UK), *The Independent* (UK), *The New York Times* as well as several African online forums, where she discusses some of the characters in her fictional narratives and how these characters represent real life women that she came across when she was doing background research for her creative work. The discussions in online and offline forums on the misery that these women face may have contributed to a growing discontent within the political establishment on the booming sex industry in countries such as Britain, Belgium, France and Ireland, as well as in several online African forums. These activities illustrate how literature can serve as a tool for championing the rights of some of the most vulnerable members of the modern society.

The figure of the merry whore has become omnipresent in European art; from the flute girls to the narratives in Emile Zola's *Nana* and Frank Wedekind's *Lulu*, and with European



history arguably suggesting that prostitution and art go hand in hand (many of the classic courtesan pictures such as Edouard Manet's take on *Nana* produced in 1877 poignantly portrayed the figure of the prostitute as seductive and alluring with her milk-white body and provocative posture suggestively gazing at admirers). While European visual art may depict the prostitute as a figure of seduction and sexual longing, what new African writers in the online space are showing us is that the African prostitute in Europe is far from being a happy whore. Seductive only to the exotic imaginary as the sexual other.

In *Anonymous* (2006), Unigwe gives us another fictional Nigerian woman, who, wanting to escape poverty in Nigeria travelled to Belgium on a false passport and visa. The immigration officer at the port of entry then exploited her by threatening her with deportation if she did not consent to sex with him in the immigration interview room. This was the protagonist's first introduction into the sex trade and wanting to make ends meet, she soon become a prostitute and she tells us that, "I am body's vendor by day. I am my body's vendor by night...The thought depresses me."

This is surely not a happy prostitute but a woman resigned to a tormented life in Europe where she now works as an exotic prostitute to European men. So online literature gives us a woman trapped in the modern day slavery. Therefore, these stories articulate the growing internationalisation of the sex trade in the form of human trafficking, in which non-West women are lured into Europe and North America to become sex slaves. In *Borrowed Smile*, the protagonist follows Bob to Antwerp, Belgium, where, instead of realising the good life she thinks she would find Europe, she is forced to become a prostitute. She enters the sex industry when she is barely eighteen, which reflects various studies that show that the majority of trafficked women enter prostitution in Europe before they are eighteen. A UK

Government Equality Office's report (2008: 8) points out that "there is considerable emphasis on 'fresh' or 'new' girls and descriptions often rely on racial or ethnic stereotypes."

In *Odour of Fate*, the narrator informs us that Anastasia had previously been taken to Italy as a sex slave to an Italian client she met in Kenya. Other characters in Unigwe's stories are also women trafficked into Europe to work as sex slaves. As argued previously, these fictional prostitutes reflect Africa's worsening fortune brought about by the introduction of economic measures such as the World Bank sanctioned Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). Narrators and protagonists tell of parents whose ability to look after their families worsen due to economic chaos and instability. As parents become poorer and are unable to look after their children, young women become vulnerable to sex traffickers and to the idea of keeping body and soul together through prostitution.

Unigwe's literary career, especially her creative fictions on African prostitutes also reflect the gendered contexts of work, labour and livelihoods not just in Africa but in the new African Diaspora of which Chika Unigwe, like several prominent young writers, is a member. The fictional prostitute in Unigwe's *Anonymous* captures the experiences of many members of the Diaspora who are themselves often marginalised in their new societies:

"I never wanted to come here [Europe]. America was my first choice. The land of the Buhraaave end the Fuhree. That was what Ikem called it. He said in America, one became rich simply by wiping old people's butts. And one could throw abuse at the president's face and go free."

The narrator in Unigwe's *The Curse* (2003) likewise tells us about the experience of the female protagonist "Once when she was accused of shoplifting at the C&A in Turnhout because she had left the shop with a safety tag on the dress she bought still on, (the cashier

had forgotten to remove it), the Manager had simply told her that there had recently been a spate of shoplifting by vreemdelingen, foreigners.”

These stories tell of women who left their loved ones in Africa to seek a better life in Europe and America, only to realise that the promise of good life is a mirage. When they arrive in the West, they often join millions of immigrants who are struggling to make ends meet. In the recent years, several newspaper reports have suggested that since the 1980s, Africans have been emigrating in larger numbers than any other period after the trans-Atlantic slave trade. While journalism may have captured some of the hardships that these migrant communities face daily in Europe and North America, through the fictional stories of African prostitutes, we are beginning to see literature articulating the experience of the postcolonial Diaspora. What some of the writings in the online space are depicting is that in order to survive the hardship of living as immigrants in the West, many Africans, especially women, have had to use many rather unsavoury strategies and coping mechanisms, and these include prostitution.

Furthermore, these fictional narratives demonstrate how African women's bodies are subject to powerful discourses within the theatres of global sex industry, in the institutional settings of international politics, as well as in everyday life. Much of the writing on African female immigrants, especially those forced by circumstances to turn to prostitution, highlights how female selves are governed socially, economically, politically, culturally, and biologically. They show how prostitution is at the confluence of issues of race, globalisation, gender, sexuality, technology and most importantly sexual exploitation.

Like Unigwe, the challenges facing African female immigrants in the West figure feature largely in some of Adichie's tales. In a radio interview with Guy Raz (21 June 2009) on the National Public Radio online, Npr.org, Adichie points out that, "I find that women ... deal

with immigration differently. And I'm interested in that." She points out that much of her fiction explores and observes those differences.

The way African women handle emigration arguably reflects how the agenda of global capitalism has consistently been an important factor in these journeys. For instance, African women were transported during the centuries of the trans-Atlantic slave trade not simply to work on plantations in the New World, but to bear children that will become future slaves. In the process, their bodies were part of the mechanical machines that ensured the smooth running of Western industrialisation.

Fictional narratives by writers such as Okot p'Bitek, Ngugi, Ekwensi etc, revealed how, during colonialism, large populations of African women were separated from their men and husbands who had to work as servants to Europeans in urban metropolises. Some of these women managed to find their way into these urban areas where the only means of survival is to serve as sex workers who meet the sexual demands of African labourers. These urban settings including Nairobi, Johannesburg, Kampala, Pretoria and Harare which were then designated white spaces, in which African women arrived as immigrants working within the unofficial libidinal economy. What we now see in the twenty-first century are examples of African women making similar journeys to white spaces of Europe and America as did the generations before them within Africa.

Over the course of five decades, much creative writing has depicted the way in which women with little or no economic clout are placed on the margins of society, both by the postcolonial state that treats most of its poor citizens badly, and the global system that pretends it cares but making little impact on their lives. As the speaker in p'Bitek's *Song of Malaya* and the narrators in some of Unigwe's online short stories remind us, African governments do not care a lot for women on the lower rung of the economic ladder. So, a close reading of those

bodies dwelling at the margin of the urban space, reveals them as symbolising the ultimate metaphor for Africa's relationship with and within the global capitalist system.

In Muthoni Garland's *Odour of Fate*, the narrator also tells us Anastasia was raised in the slum of Nairobi, to poor parents who had more children than they could afford to look after. Her own children were killed in an arson attack by a former jealous lover. Disowned by her parents and relatives when she became a prostitute, she went to Italy with a client and returned to Kenya with another Italian who soon died of a heart attack.

The narrator in Chika Unigwe's *The Curse*, also tells similar story about the protagonist:

“Oge did not always have money but she had always wanted it. She was not born to parents to whom money was no object. Right from a young age, she was determined to break the chain of misery in which her family wallowed. She envied the smooth skin of the wealthy. The smell of the rich. And she was willing to do anything short of kill and steal to make it. And when opportunity presented itself, she grabbed it with both hands. She shook opportunity's hand and refused to let go.”

Through the figure of public prostitute, we see how those who have been largely ignored by the postcolonial state are also being left open to emotional and physical exploitation. Africa does not care for impoverished women like Anastasia, and as Emeke (1996) suggests, prostitution becomes a very strong option out of poverty, with the women and girls placing a premium on having unprotected sex with their clients for more money. Bamgbose (2002) tells us in his study of young female adolescent prostitution that not only do patrons pay a higher rate for sex without condoms but that she has seen a destitute mother offering her daughters for unprotected sex in Lagos for as little as one US dollar. C. Sarah Jones' (2009) study for UNICEF and the Government of Kenya on young sex workers in Kenya's coastal towns,

reports similar trends, but this time most of the patrons are foreign tourists, women and men alike. Like these real-life young Kenyans, Anastasia has been having unprotected sex with men from a very young age, and so is exposed to HIV / Aids.

Like Unigwe, Muthoni Garland's *Odour of Fate* (2008) links sex work and the figure of the African prostitute with cultural hegemony and the agenda of late capitalism. It is a story told through the eye of a fictional European expatriate, who is a senior diplomat attached to the coastal city of Mombasa, in Kenya. Garland arguably uses Anastasia as a metaphor for the capitalist exploitation of the continent in addition to portraying the exoticization of the black female body. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist tells the reader about his obsession with Anastasia, a sex worker who is "both at the centre of attraction and the orbit of disgrace." He points out that "I was not the only man equally attracted and repelled by the giant woman, black as midnight...She was wild excess, the sensual figure writhing in rising mists of dry ice, and the comparative excuse for others to dance with greater wantonness." This of course, is the writer using the figure of the African female prostitute as a symbol of Africa's relationship with the West.

Bora Bora Disco club is the market place, where black female bodies are on sale to moneyed Western men. The protagonist's portrayal of the prostitute becomes the representation of Africa - a land notorious for its constant sexual excesses, a continent that is highly exotic and simultaneously dangerous. This is arguably a Conradian idea of Africa, one whose composition is seen as highlighting European grace and its savagery accentuating Western humanity. The protagonist employs Victorian era imagery in his comprehension of African female sexuality.

What the protagonist expresses about black women's bodies as the Other, is captured by the protagonist in Unigwe's *Borrowed Smile*, who tells us about some of her clients in Belgium,

whom she describes as “The one who simply likes the feel of a black woman's body. His wife is too milky and he likes to see the contrast between the insides of his legs and the outsides of yours. Another who simply wants to explore the myth of the black woman being a tiger in bed. He asks you to growl and even though you feel foolish, you oblige him and he gives you a huge tip.”

In these two online short stories, we see the way in which African women sometimes function as bodies to western imaginations. The protagonist in *Odour of Fate* makes further reference to the prostitutes working in the coast of Mombasa as "answering the mating call of British and American soldiers on shore leave in the dirty, exotic town of Mombassa." Here, Garland uses sexual exchanges that occur in many coastal towns in Africa to represent the dynamic of the relationship between the moneyed Westerners and the impoverished locals, whose bodies are there for exploitation.

Sex in Mombasa is cheap, as are the natural materials that Africa produces. The cheapness of commercial sex is accentuated as the protagonist boasts: "So I fucked her. Again and again." The protagonist then informs us that his wife is in England and his children attending an expensive boarding school in Britain. He tells us that in order to maintain his respectability, he "cultivated places, looks and practiced lines to use in case I got caught." White expatriates in Africa, he also points out, "do not go to black places, and they certainly do not go anywhere low class. They write their proposals for poverty eradication for development projects from the comfort of leafy, high-class neighbourhoods." Therefore Africa becomes a continent of raw minerals, waiting to be explored, mined and then carted away to be refined not on the continent but in a civilized space.

The uneducated sex worker is described by the protagonist as being so dirty that she becomes "The Odour", and so like Africa's raw materials, the protagonist takes her to a white space -

the clean Mombasa neighbourhood where expatriates and upper middle class Kenyans live. The Mombasa sex worker calls herself Anastasia, which the protagonist probably thinks is ridiculous for an African name, as he tells us that she is a cartoon-like character. Like Africa in some foreign imagination, she is unreal, child-like and a symbol of chaos and disorder, and it is no surprise that we are told that she speaks "in a discordant voice". However, his wife in England, he tells us is "conventional" and thus symbolises the norm - the self, with the gyrating African prostitute the epitome of African insanity. And so, Garland gives us a familiar trope - postcolonial literary representation of Africa's otherness by Western characters. His status as a diplomat marks him out both as a symbol of the empire and as a figure of global political economy's marginalisation of the non-West.

As a privileged male, he represents authority and becomes a person who is looked upon as the keeper of mores, so he creates a facade and tries to avoid being seen in public in brothels. But he enjoys the service that sex workers provide. In this story, we therefore see how the relationship between the protagonist and Anastasia - the figure of the public prostitute in Kenya - speaks to how certain economic and cultural interdependencies shape the interaction between the West and contemporary Africa. Similarly, in Sefi Atta's *Glory* (2008), posted on African-writing.com, the protagonist tells us about older European men who are patrons of younger Nigerian prostitutes:

"I saw a woman with an oyinbo man who looked old enough to be her grandfather. Her T-shirt was tight and short, and her bobbies stuck out. He had a hooked nose and his hair was wet with sweat. So was his shirt. He carried a brown briefcase that seemed to weigh him down ... From his appearance, he didn't seem to be worth much, wherever he was coming from, but that was the trouble with the naira. Anyone could come to Nigeria and become rich, once they converted their currency to ours."



The narrator then uses prostitution in an upper middle class Lagos neighbourhood where many Westerners live to point out similar exploitation of Africa: “If the oyinbos at the hotel were not screwing someone out of their money, what were they looking for in a place like Lagos?”

To complicate this even further, these interactions and economic interdependencies point to discursive possibilities and impossibilities. Cultural tourism may be good, but sexual tourism degrades the Black body further. The lived reality is that Kenya, like many African countries, needs Western tourists in order to grow its economy. At the same time, sexual tourism brings more tourist dollars for the government of Kenya, while it also benefits those on the lower rung of the economic ladder in the postcolonial space who work within this sector, even if literature and intellectuals read these relationships as a good example of a wanton exploitation of the non-West.

Furthermore, these stories support recent media reports of a booming sex trade along African coastlines, with sex workers preferring Western clients over the locals, because of the power of the American dollar, the Euro and the pound sterling. For example, a report in the South African Mail and Guardian (2008) suggests that Mombasa is one of most popular sex tourism destinations on the continent, and that commercial sex work is one of the main means of livelihood for a lot of women (including underage girls) in Mombasa. Anastasia, the Mombasa prostitute, also possesses many of key elements of traditional sex work in urban Africa; she has little education, she experiences poor working conditions and therefore her economic prospect is bleak. She is also regularly exposed to violence.

These fictional stories speak to the emerging relationship between poorer non-Western people and the moneyed class of Europe and North America - the exploitation of the native

by people with the money to explore and exploit their bodies in order to satisfy their cravings for the exotic and what they see as the abnormal.

The position of the prostitute as the exotic Other portrayed within the online writing space, arguably highlights the process of globalization - the flow of people into Kenya and Nigeria looking for sex with 'exotic' African prostitutes. In some of these fictional narratives, Africa is to European men a continent of exotic women with wild sexual urges, and simultaneously the land of Safari holidays. These representations are probably being used by these young writers to accentuate global conjunctures, which Appadurai (1996) suggests are parts of the landscapes of globalization. The argument here is that prostitution in African urban areas, as well as the figure of the African prostitute elucidates the dynamic of power within the discourses of modernity and globalisation.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CLASS AND THE NEW SEX WORKER

In the last two chapters, I analysed African literature's fixation with the trope of the prostitute through the figure of the modern girl. In my analysis I point out that the experience of fictional prostitutes in new online writing and in the novels that came before the digital age, speak to the experience of marginalised real life African women; women who are classified by society as outcasts because they have crossed the margin of what modernity sees as the norm. They are bad women living at the margin of modern patriarchal history that seeks only 'good' women. I argued that while some of the new online writers still follow the patriarchal line in their representation of fictional prostitutes, other new voices in cyberspace are no longer using fictional prostitutes as part of the nationalistic project but to illustrate the place of marginalised women in a globalised economy. In both instances, online literature positions the online writer as a reporter of events, with short stories serving as evidence of real occurrences within the libidinal economy.

But the figure of the African prostitute is much more than that of a vulnerable semi-literate woman who is either being trafficked abroad to satisfy the sexual fantasies of European men, or one who had to choose between starvation and working in a seedy hotel in urban Africa. Online short stories are also revealing to us that there are significant new types of sex work that are emerging in the cities of Nigeria and Kenya. These are the narratives of public sex workers and their clients operating under the shadow of the national economy. In her study of prostitution in urban Indonesia, Rebecca Surtees (2004) points out that a new category of sex workers is emerging in the postcolonial world and that the way these women operate within the sex industry merits our attention. Surtees's finding reveals that these new sex workers include middle class female students in urban areas who provide sexual services in exchange

for things like mobile phones, dresses and other expensive gifts. She also argues that there are professional middle class women in postcolonial towns and cities providing sexual services as part of their job, while others provide sexual services to rich men separate from their professional duties.

Surtees is probably right; some of the new online voices are representing these women in fiction. These short stories and online autobiographical fiction are debunking the myth that suggests sex work is the exclusive domain of the impoverished rural dwellers who enter the sex industry only when deceived by men or forced by hardship. In the last chapter, I argued that this perception can be attributed to some of the earlier works of literature, in which prostitutes are often described as working class girls who patronise beer parlours and cheap hotels. The representations in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* and Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Malaya*, for example, portrayed their fictional prostitutes as either working class or village girls. However, from some of the writings that are now being published online, we see narrators stressing the fact that working class public prostitutes and urbane educated women alike who sleep with men to earn a living or for wealth and career advancement are all probably engaging in sex work. Moreover, online short stories with protagonists who work in the African sex industry make us think about space. Because these narratives in cyberspace speak to coming out of the shadows, to the claiming of space in a patriarchal Africa and the quest to be heard in that space. These texts are about taboo breaking by prostitutes in this African space as well as the contestation of the space for equality. Fictional sex workers are showing us that prostitutes have the potential to redefine and reconfigure the African space with their bodies and with their voices.

The fictional characters that are emerging in cyberspace show us that African sex workers manifest a far greater subjective complexity than is normally presented. The notion of middle class sex workers is perhaps not new, but economic factors such as growing urbanization in

addition to the freedom that political liberation is bringing Africa women, is making African literature focus its attention on those women whom the society would not normally see in the same light as public prostitutes. Interestingly, what these online fictional narratives suggest to us is that literary studies and allied fields need to look at the libidinal economy in Africa from a more robust angle than we currently do. While these trends are not, as yet, widespread, their emergence does hold significance for our reading of the sex industry and our appreciation of the lives and motivations of sex workers. These stories in the online space reveal the complexity and the changing nature of the libidinal economy.

The narrator in the autobiographic fictional blog *Nairobi Nights*, tells us that women from all walks of life can be classified as prostitutes:

“The underlying logic is that all women in a way or another are prostitutes. Very few, if any, women would say with a straight face that they never had sex even once with the money or security component at the back of their minds. We the so called prostitutes are the brave ones to come out in the open and stop beating about the bush; we are in it for the money, the pleasure is secondary.” (*Episode 6: Just Call Me Malaya*).

In *Nairobi Nights*, we have regular posts by a university-educated prostitute who goes by the name of Sue, and who writes incisively about her career as a public prostitute. The blog has become Africa’s version of the famous British blog *Belle de Jour* - which was real-life account of the life of a UK-based academic scientist Brooke Magnanti - who also became a prostitute whilst pursuing a PhD. With regard to *Nairobi Nights*, Sue is not the blogger’s real name and the writer posing as the narrator has suggested several times that some of her accounts are not real, therefore *Nairobi Nights* falls into a genre which Alex Hughes suggests (2002) is auto(biographical) fiction. Hughes argues that “auto fiction may be understood as a narrative modality that inhabits the referential space likewise colonized by autobiography

proper, but at the same time offers a patently enriched and treated, hence fictionalized, and metamorphic, version of the life-story of the auto-fictionneur.” (569).

In cyberspace, the autobiographical blog fiction places the blogger and her view of or selection of her experience at the core of the blog post. In addition, writings such as this show how more than any other technologies available today, the internet allows sexually charged stories to be published without any form of censorship, and with the potential to reach hundreds of millions of online readers. However, there is no distinction between what is made up and what is real, and often, there are no means of verifying or distinguishing between the fictional and the real life experience of the writers and their readers. Michelle Kendrick (1995: 1) posits that a lot made-up components of human life can become real in cyberspace because the online space is a “cultural conjunction of fictions, projections, and anxieties that foreground the ways in which technology intervenes in our subjectivity.” This, of course, is not a new phenomenon; technology has continuously intervened in African thought as argued by Karin Barber (2007). The narratives of Olaudah Equiano, the imaginative fiction of I’B Thomas’ fiction, popular theatre in Africa and the rise of Nollywood, all speak to a history of technology intervening in African subjectivity. Therefore, online African fictional narratives are part of the ways in which ‘the machine’ is making ‘real’ what the human mind imagines. Sex in African cyberspace is thus a reconfiguration of reality.

In her blog posts, Sue uses the same epistolary techniques that I.B Thomas employed nearly a century earlier in the newspaper stories of Sęgilōla. The narratives appear as series of confessionals in the online space about her life as a sex worker to readers across the world. Like Sęgilōla, her life history is tied into known places and real time - Nairobi. For example, in her ‘About Me’ section of her blog, she informs us that she practices “along Koinange Street, Nairobi.” In the real space of Kenya, Koinange Street is a well-known red-light

district of Nairobi, known to be frequented by sex tourists from within and outside of Africa in addition to local (Nairobi) male clients. Sue tells us about some of these men and she intentionally mentions popular Nairobi nightclubs, personalities and popular celebrities and music, so as to give her narratives a great amount of credibility.

Like the narrative of I.B Thomas' *Sęgilola*, Sue regularly teases her readers by withholding her real identity but then promising them that she will reveal everything when the right time comes. Many readers, addicted to the titillation often write comments under each post hoping for more. Their responses suggest they understand confidentiality and perhaps the ambiguity of gender and sexual identity in cyberspace. But there is an absence of detail or, rather, a sketchiness of detail that sometimes makes the exercise simultaneously provocative and tedious, which is strikingly similar to my own reading of (the regular tediousness in) the narrative of I.B Thomas' *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sęgilola Eleyinju, Ełęgbęrun Oko L'Aiye* (1929). For example, cyberspace's Sue will tell us: "I met up with a guy. He had a nice car. He was cheap." Or, "young guys sometimes want to pay more." The narratives on the blog *Nairobi Nights* may not have yet attained the same literary standard as John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1748 & 2010) - that humorous rendering of the male pornographic imagination, simply because, at times, it does seem that it intentionally promise more than it gives (as, so often, does the pornographic imagination), which often frustrates the reader. So much so that a reader commented:

"....It's a mysterious world for some of us with boring routine lives and 8 to 5 desk jobs and weekends spent in front of the TV. Please try to be more vivid in your descriptions of your colleagues, encounters, the watchmen and bouncers etc. I'm curious to know the nature of these men. What state of mind is a man when he picks you up? Do you ever talk? You also haven't answered yet why you chose the street. I'm also curious about your childhood and how you lost your virginity. What course

did you do in college? Are your parents poor? Have you ever been in love? Do prostitutes get pregnant from their clients or what do you do about birth control and how do you deal with STDs?"

Through the blog writer, Sue, the fictional prostitute often responds to readers' comments and joins them in debates over many current affairs issues such as the illegality of prostitution in Kenya, globalisation, African femininity and so on. These attempts at building trust with her readers while using a pseudonym is important to understanding the nature of text, gender, threaded identity and the public in the online space. Furthermore, we see the way in which the internet allows an open and potentially anonymous space to explore sexual and gender performances in twenty-first urban African space. As Anthony Garcia Gomez (2009: 27) argues: "Through weblog writing, female bloggers explore shared interests and find a medium through which they can express themselves freely." Of course, this is relevant if we are taking the fictional character Sue, as the person blogging about her life, just as we assumed that it was Sęgilola, who wrote those confessional letters to the readers of *Akede Eko* in 1929.

In her examination of the growth of weblogs and the internet in Iran, Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi (2004) argues that the idea of the online public space is pushing the World Wide Web into the domain of a "universal language," grounded in the socio-political aspects of everyday life. Its cultural significance varies considerably from place to place according to people's diverse experiences, needs and aspirations. In democratic societies, she argues that cyberspace is often viewed as an 'alter' space of information, research and leisure that functions in a parallel or complementary fashion to existing public spaces and institutions. However, Amir-Ebrahimi (2004) notes that in countries where public spaces are controlled by traditional or restrictive cultural forces, the internet can take on varied signification. Amir-Ebrahimi argues that, "The act of writing a weblog in the universal, yet semi-private space of



the internet, helps them to discover, reconstruct or crystallize their ‘true’ selves in virtual public spaces. In the absence of a body, these new ‘bodiless-selves’ enter a new world and form new communities which are restricted and controlled in their real physical spaces.” (<http://www.badjens.com/rediscovery.html>). In Kenya, where the real voice of prostitutes is rarely heard because the public spaces may be monitored by politicians and religious leaders, the internet can provide a new space for the marginalised prostitute and also allow men who pay for sex to talk candidly about sex and sex work without repercussions from the society. In *Episode 34: Relics of a Prostitute* (28 June 2011), Sue points out that:

“Anyone visiting my house would find no explicit clue to hint at the kind of work I do. A pack of condoms, a bottle of spirit and half-life cigarettes are items to be found on the coffee table of many present day women of my age. Personally though when I look around I see items not obvious to others but which remind me of my past and present life. Like most people I have over the years unconsciously kept mementos of low intrinsic but high sentimental value. Only recently did I consciously look at the items and saw in them signposts of a journey I have taken in slightly over two and half years.”

Sue’s true sexual identity is concealed from many in the real space of Nairobi but her real sexuality and identity are laid bare before the online public. There is therefore arguably a level of liberty that the internet provides for African sexuality. What people say and do online and on their mobile phones through text messages may actually represent a freedom from the offline space. In this regard, the digital space can be considered a tool of empowerment for Sue and the readers of her blog. This empowerment begins with what Amir-Ebrahimi terms as a “redefinition of the Self” and an affirmation of one’s true sexual identity.

One of the key elements of online performance especially that of blogging is that anonymity is enabled. Many of the commentators on the *Nairobi Nights* blog often wonder if the writer is a man or woman, although the writer maintains that she is a woman. Blog fictions on

pornography and prostitution mimic some certain aspects of oral text, in which gender cannot be determined from texts. Just as in the oral tradition, Sheldon Stryker (1998) argues that identity in the online space can be plural, multifaceted and semi-permanent, because of the way in which blog writings construct and hide identities. Identity theorists have shown that emotion and self are closely tied. Not only does the sexual identity of the writer of *Nairobi Nights* remain undefined just as in many pre-colonial oral texts, the online space also enables the identity of many of the blog's readers to remain hidden, as many often write under the alias 'anonymous'. So we arguably have a fiction masquerading as a real account of a real life person, with readers whose real identities cannot be determined within the virtual landscape.

Michael W. Ross (2005: 344) argues that "the internet allows for a surrogate body to experiment and to be experimented upon." Here the fictional body of Sue and her readers may present false identities and false bodies. A man may present himself as a woman expressing the sexual fantasies of a woman and a man who is a woman in cyberspace today can decide to present himself as a man tomorrow, so sexual discussions on blogs such that of *Nairobi Nights*, are arguably sometimes being made by 'false' virtual bodies. Sexuality is thus in a state of flux as the boundary between the real self and the virtual body is being blurred and even merged at times. With the near ubiquity of mobile phones and internet cafes in urban Africa, acquiring and publishing online information has never been easier; however, increased access to consuming and producing digital information raises new challenges to establishing and evaluating online credibility. This is what Ross points out as an important difference "between typing, doing, and being!" (344).

When we looked at online African writings on queer figures and on the trope of the prostitute, we see a difference from the print and the offline space with regard to freedom of expression. Capitalism has the capacity to reinforce the belief that sex outside of marriage is

unproductive to the society. In the offline space, prostitution is deemed as the wastage of male productive energy, so it is discouraged by various figures of authority, but as sex sells online, and this is probably why many young writers are using the online space to represent a diversity of sexualities. In *Episode 35: Of Boredom and a Funeral* (5 July 2011), Sue tells us that:

“Nowadays I am not ashamed to call myself a prostitute. But there was a time I was in denial. Even after walking to a dingy room at the Sabina Joy, lying on dirty tattered mattress, lowering my pants, having a drunken man mount me and pay 200 shillings for it, I still could not punch my fist in the air and say “Yes I am now a prostitute!” Those days are now gone, they had to go if I had to make it in this trade.”

The freedom to come out openly as a prostitute in the online space to potential clients suggests that not only does capitalism influence the social system and the way individuals interact within it as a whole, it also has an impact on our identity because our personal identity tends to conform to the way the market describes us. Some of the commentators on *Nairobi Nights* are real sex workers who include links to their websites in their comments so as to entice potential clients. Prostitution in the physical space of Nairobi may be seen as backward but cybersex sells in the online space, and so what may be considered as degrading in real life may be seen as the norm and acceptable in cyberspace. In the addition, the online becomes a marketplace for African literature, readers and sex workers alike. In a comment posted on June 6, 2011, to the post *This and That* (8 April 2011), the reader posing as Sugarmominkenyia advertises ‘herself’: “Mature discreet romance, fun, juicy affairs in Kenya” and provide the above clickable web-link. It is unimaginable that in the print age serious and popular literature were used as mediums for sexual partnering, but the fact that readers such as Sugarmominkenyia (<http://sugarmominkenyia.blogspot.com/>) are using *Nairobi Nights* as a marketplace points to the intermediary role that cybertexts can play in the

life of online readers. In the past, potential sexual partners have to be living in the same region in order to foster meaningful sexual exchanges but now, through the online writing space, readers who share mutual sexual interests can meet and experiment.

Moreover, the creation of the fictional character Sue - the Nairobi prostitute in 2011, like that of be Sẹgilọla, the libidinal Lagos woman of 1929, is geared towards presenting a libidinal woman's voice, but the former comes out of an agenda that is designed to puncture some of the myths surrounding the figure of the prostitute and the role she plays within the libidinal economy, nationally and globally. Both texts, despite the ninety year gap in their publication, speak to the continuous economic anxiety with regard to gender roles in contemporary Africa. Like many writings on female sexuality, both are writings that belie the tenacity of the discourse of modernity and the libidinal economy that came out of it.

While *Itan Igbesi Aiye Emi Sẹgilọla Eḷeyinju, Eḷegberun Oko L'Aiye* (1929) is “a highly moralising and editorialising press” (see Karin Barber, 2007: 9), *Nairobi Nights* can arguably be said to be the prostitute's response to many of the discourses about her in African literature. For example, Sue punctures the myth surrounding the need for young women to define their sense of power and desire mostly in terms of dominant male narratives. In a blog post, *Episode 1: I Can't Feel Your Thing* (January 3, 2011), she tells us about her knowledge of the male sexual ego, in which a woman's sexual pleasure is assumed to be secondary to that of a man:

“From about two years of practice I have noted men react in two ways when a girl is indifferent. First and most likely; the man will dislike the girl and never want to see her again. They dare not bruise their egos again. Second the man might seek to redeem himself and his ego by sleeping with the girl again, hoping and praying that the girl responds positively. I didn't want to see the man I was with yesterday ever again. I hated him, so I

decided to hit where it hurts. At 5 in the morning after our last round of sex and ready to leave I said to him “That your thing disappears inside me, I can’t feel it at all.”

Instead of massaging her client’s ego, Sue decides to belittle his sexual prowess. Unlike the didactic posts from some female writers that were discussed in the previous chapter, the fictional prostitute shows us how the virtual space offers libidinal African women a place to define themselves and a space to articulate their experiences and sexual reality in a way that may not be possible in real life or in print. Sue’s candid view on male superego reflects the honesty with which some of the fictional prostitutes created by ‘real’ writers speak. Like the speaker in p’Bitek’s *Song of Malaya*, Sue constantly ridicules the hypocrisy and the ego of male clients; men who have been repressed because the contemporary society has raised them to see sexual adventures as immoral.

As previously pointed out in the previous chapter, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook argues that for many young people across the world, social networking encourages honesty, so what we are reading in online fiction like *Nairobi Nights* and Chika Unigwe’s work arguably reflect the true nature of the libidinal economy in the twenty-first century. Antonio Garcia Gomez (2010) likewise points out that the online space gives heterosexual women the chance to depict alternative realities in a way that they could not in real life. Therefore, the libidinal economy is normalizing sex work through online literature, because cyberspace is largely uncensored in countries like Kenya and Nigeria. So, what the society in the offline space may deem immoral, such as pornography and prostitution are actually transformed from something that was exclusively for the male gaze to something that is for both the male and female gaze and allows women to achieve higher power and status in a male dominated capitalistic society. What Sue’s fictional blog may be telling us is that many contemporary African societies need more eroticism to allow people to be more in touch with their bodies, and to channel sexuality to fit with the demands of labour.

*Nairobi Nights* like the writings analysed previously show how the internet enables competing narratives made up by crediting or debunking the contemporary society's concepts of love and relationships. But while in the last chapters, many of the female bloggers narrate their romantic relationships by reaffirming these traditional love myths and, in so doing, define their identities as subordinate to their boyfriends,' for Sue, the prostitute, the ideas that 'love is enough' or that 'a woman needs a man to be happy,' are far from being the dominant discourse. So, Sue's blog posts illustrate discourses of financial independence and empowerment.

Sue's fictional posts have totalled up to forty-two episodes, and these writings contain details of sexual relationships that take place between her and her clients, sometimes in expensive hotels, seedy sex bars and inside cars. These secret encounters, which on the part of the clients, are disguised from the public and family members, speak to what Elina Penttinen (2010: 30) aptly describes as "the temporality of the public and private spheres and also the change in enacted subjectivity between them." Be they foreign or local men, Sue tells us that her clients often see her as the exotic Other - the hyper-sexualised woman who fulfils the fantasies their wives could not fulfil. Audre Lorde's (1982) terminology of "biomythography," comes to mind here. Like the black lesbian body which Lorde analysed, the figure of the prostitute as depicted on the blog *Nairobi Nights*, is neither an essential or fixed identity nor the site for a unified conception of community or home, but rather, as the Other, the body which inhabits the very house of difference.

From comments left by readers on *Nairobi Nights* blog post, we can argue cybersex is now becoming ingrained in the online African space. The house of difference that the body of Sue embodies for some of the blog's followers is manifested in statements such as those left as responses to the blog post *This and That* (8 April 2011):

“This is the most hilarious of all your writings. That aside, secretly I fantasize about being your boyfriend despite your profession. Talk of intimacy at a distance through the web. It’s just that I feel you so much.” – an anonymous reader.

Another anonymous reader posts this comment:

“HEY SUE I HAVE TO ASK HAS ANYONE EVER REQUESTED FOR AN ASS FCUK AND WHILE WE ARE ON THAT TOPIC HAVE YOU EVER BEEN ASS FCUK???? “ – an anonymous reader on 1 May 2011.

In the digital space, sex does not necessarily have to be physical it can be simulated through webcam, writing and verbal communication. African literature in the online space is also becoming a site of sexual fantasy. The statements left by these readers are not the types book publishers would publish and they may probably not have been uttered by their writers in the offline space. Here we see the changing nature of literature and sexual behaviour. Online literature has the potential of carrying and exposing repressed sexual desires, this may have a knock-on effect on sexual expressions in the offline space. As Simon (1996) has argued, cyberspace provides a new way of seeing and an avenue to express or think aloud what may have been deemed unmentionable in the offline space. The explicitness that we see in online fiction and poetry points to the possibility that the digital space may be becoming a new site of African sexuality – that is, cybersex. Fictional characters can become the cyborgs that readers express their sexual desires through and may even fulfil some of their fantasies through interaction with fictional online characters. This possibly is referred to by Ross and Kauth (2002) as “carrying on via computer proxy sexual activity through rich description with accompanying sexual arousal, often to orgasm.”(quoted in Ross, 2005: 342).

Online short stories on prostitution can also be seen as providing a means of investigating and experiencing African sexuality. Oluyemisi Bamgbose (2002) argues that it is practically impossible to collect reliable data about sex work in Africa because of the shadowy nature of

the libidinal economy. Therefore, the intimate details that writers provide about fictional prostitutes may be taken as evidence of African sexuality and can even be used to interrogate what is deemed to be African sexuality. The discussions over the sex life of fictional prostitutes can therefore be taken as social anthropological and sociological evidence when investigating sexuality on the continent, because of the frankness and candidness with which writers present narratives, and with which readers speak online.

One can also argue that the fictional figure of the prostitute in cyberspace represents what Giddens (1992) sees as “a literature of hope.” Writers such as Chika Unigwe, Shailja Patel and Chimamanda Adichie, are arguably hoping that literature can change the thinking of online readers, and that in turn, these readers will carry the message of sexual tolerance to those who are not connected to the information superhighway. Literature, especially fiction narratives in social media pages, becomes a means of advocating for the rights of sex workers by enlightening readers about the complexity of sex work and how what politicians and religious leaders might be telling them may be different from reality, which ironically is being depicted by fictional characters. Short stories that are published online have the potential to reach readers on a mass level. Writers have the potential to use fictional characters to educate mass audience of readers but also to receive a message from mass audience. Additionally, the online reading public has the potential to communicate messages in fiction with other members of the reading public through social media pages, chats, emails and listservs. Discussions of literature on social media and on blogs can inspire a change of attitude towards sex workers. In this way, interactivity can be used to mobilize sympathy for sex workers and marginalised members of the society. The message of hope is what some texts in pre-colonial period aimed for. For example, a Yoruba proverb says “*Abọ ọrọ la nso fun ọmọ lu’abi; to ba de inu rẹ a do didi*”. (translation: half a statement is enough for the wise; once it sinks in, it becomes whole). The way oral texts transform themselves in the



mind of the listening public can be parlayed online, and fictional representations in the online write space can be agents of change in the offline space.

On the part of the reader, fictional prostitutes may not only represent part of sexual fantasies, but the lifestyle of the fictional prostitute may confirm to the reader that he or she is not abnormal simply because her sexual desires do not conform to the ideals of the offline space. Because online literature such as *Nairobi Nights* often tries to blur the line between reality and the imagined, readers may hope that they can find a wife like Sue who will not only fulfil their sexual longing but will also understand their other emotional needs. As Giddens (1992: 45) points out, cybertexts can provide a feeling of intimacy between the readers and fictional subjects “not so much because the loved one is idealized – although this is part of the story – but because it presumes a psychic communication, a meeting of souls which is reparative in character.”

### **Sex and the Mobile Phone**

In her social anthropological survey of twenty-first century Indonesia, Surtees (2004: <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue10/surtees.html#n77>) argues that increasing numbers of urban middle class female students are working in the emergent sex industry. Surtees says that these are “young, urban women, many of whom are students and even teenagers, who provide *gadun* [‘boyfriend’ or ‘client’] with sexual services for cash or, often, gifts. The services range from touching and fondling [peres-peres] to the provision of sexual intercourse.” Surtees’ finding is similar to the result of a study by Bamgbose (2002: 573) on teenage prostitution in Nigeria, which points out that: “one important aspect of prostitution among adolescent females is that some are involved in it as a part-time activity. Many of the part-timers are students in secondary schools and universities who combine prostitution with schooling.”

Bamgbose's female Nigerian subjects and Surtees' real life "pecun" – woman for free in contemporary Indonesia – are present in some of the African online short stories and YouTube dramas. For example, Pauline Odhiambo's *Her Father's Friend* (25 October 2010), is an online fiction about a young lower middle class school girl who is sleeping with the rich father of one of her close friends. The narrator tells us that: "The second time she let him touch her breast he had just given her sixty thousand shillings to buy a new phone. This happened two days after she first let him touch her and now she marvelled at the power of those two round globes sitting high on her chest."

As in real life Indonesia, online short stories about urban Africa are suggesting that the quest to be part of the digital world is one of the reasons why increasing number of middle class women are turning to sex work. Like the real life women in Surtees' study, the fictional character in *Her Father's Friend* is not living in abject poverty, rather she chooses to sleep with older men so "she could afford to buy nice clothes and pay for food at Java while meeting with her equally rich buddies with more or less equally rich fathers. There they would laugh and eat crispy, golden-coloured fries dipped in sweet and sour ketchup and washed down with creamy vanilla milkshakes." For some of these young women sex work is a lifestyle choice and it brings with it the chance to partake in the lifestyle of the rich in urban Africa.

In addition, instead of just 'working' the streets, some of the online short stories and YouTube dramas illustrate the way in which middle class sex workers are using the internet and mobile phones to get a better quality of customers, thus professionalising their trade and minimizing exposure to violence. A reading of posts in *Nairobi Nights* in addition to 'conventional' short stories such as *Ashewos Anonymous*, shows that new technologies is allowing fictional prostitutes and real life women to control their image and manage their career better as sex workers.

Fictional 'new' sex workers can also be taken as an embodiment of growing digital consumerism across Africa. In some of the new Nollywood movies, having the latest mobile phone and a Facebook profile have become a status symbol among young urban Africans. The fixation with being part of the digital world is pithily captured in the Nollywood Love's YouTube drama *Blackberry Babes* - a series of plays about young middle class Nigerian women who conduct sexual relationships with men for money and material goods through their Blackberry. The blurb for the movies on YouTube read:

"The invention of the new Blackberry Series spontaneously defines the kind of friends or clique you will belong in the society. For the ladies it equals fashion and style also part of every classy girl's establishment. For the Men it's simply a means to an end. The ladies will do all it takes to own a piece or more as the guys looks for something deeper."

Here we see the other side of digital Africa – that of wanton materialism. Some of the fictional characters in online fiction and dramas are not actually concerned about using the digital space to defend sexual liberty but are solely fixated on material gains. These online pieces reveal the complex nature of the libidinal economy and the complexity of some of the characters operating within this space. Frederic Jameson (1984 & 1991) is arguably one of the major analyses of postmodern lifestyle. Jameson draws on the German thinker Ernest Mandel's research work, to suggest that postmodernism is the cultural logic of a distinct phase of capitalism focused on this process of globalization. Jameson associates this development with the phenomenon Mandel called "late capitalism." For Jameson, globalisation is the third historical stage of capitalism, which is mainly informed by the business operations of large multinational conglomerates whose resources and loyalties go

beyond the boundaries of any one country. The energy which some of these fictional ‘new’ sex workers devote to the pursuit of luxurious digital goods speaks to an aspiration to global digitality, even if it means using their bodies and sexuality as bargaining tools.

At the start of *Blackberry Babes I*, a man approaches one of the young women who then tells him that she will talk to him only if he has the latest version of Blackberry phone. The women of *Blackberry Babes* regularly manipulate men – their lecturers and ‘sugar daddies’ alike – by providing sexual services for good grades and Blackberry phones. The women are obsessed with their Facebook image and judge potential clients by their digital quality. They use their mobile phones to steal and store credit card details from their victims, and cheat in examinations through using their mobile phones. In addition, these young women’s obsession with the latest mobile phones and digital devices indicate that fictional middle class new sex workers are greedy, manipulative, single-minded and cruel. Fictional narratives often depict the figure of the whore as superficial, immoral and manipulative, from these stories one can argue that this stereotype is being confirmed by some digital creative writers through these fictional characters. Unlike the some of the poor fictional prostitutes in the last chapter, the middle class sex worker is a prodigious spender.

Zygmunt Bauman (2007: 6) sees young people’s obsession with digital materials and social media as part of the “the game of socialising,” and the aim is “to promote an attractive and desirable *commodity*, and so to try as hard as they can, and using the best means at their disposal, to enhance the market value of the goods they sell. And the commodities they are prompted to put on the market, promote and sell are *themselves*.” If we apply Bauman’s hypothesis to new sex work as represented by fictional characters, we can argue that the digital age is taking urban Africa into a new age of digital consumerism, and in the process the African body becomes a digital commodity. In addition the digital age may be encouraging aggression and avarice among many young Africans. Of course, these elements

have always been associated with the sex trade, and what these fictional narratives further confirm is that greed and self-centredness cut across class and social background.

### **New Sex Workers**

In numerous African novels and short stories published over the years, as well as in Nollywood movies, we often see older married men as ‘sugar-daddies’ chasing after younger women, for secretive trysts, which often lead to that woman becoming a subordinate wife. While this phenomenon still endures in many online short stories, we are also seeing fictional male characters seeking educated mistresses with no strings attached but for that ‘girlfriend experience’ and they are often willing to pay a lot of money for this experience. In *Birdsong* (2010), an online short story for the New Yorker magazine website, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie provides us with a protagonist who can be said to be a sex-and-the-city figure. The protagonist is a university graduate working for the community-relations section of a Lagos-based mobile phone company, Celnnet Telecom. The protagonist tells us that the man, whom she refers to as “My lover,” is an important client. Through this story, we see a depiction of a new and growing type of sexual relationship taking place in emerging economies like Nigeria and Kenya, where young female professionals often willingly accept romantic involvement with their company’s clients for several reasons, which may include promotion within their organisation, extra income for material goods, or in order to secure a contract or commission. Rebecca Surtees (2004) points out this group of urban women, who are usually beautiful and well-educated, enter such sexual relationships as part of the unwritten rules in emerging economies. Surtees suggests that this phenomenon goes against “mainstream sexual discourse to which the middle class, in particular, adhere” (6).

The sexual market that some middle class fictional female characters - such as Segilola and the protagonist in *Birdsong* - indulge in fits into what some African researchers have come to term as 'transactional sex'. In an interview with researchers Folake Sholola and Louisa Ibhaze (2008), Leslie Ann Foster who is the director of the NGO Masimanyane Women's Support Centre in East London, South Africa, argues that "Transactional sex often takes place between people who know each other and it is being rewarded in a relationship for sex. While commercial sex is when people, (mostly men) pay to have sex with women and it is almost always with women they do not love." (4).

The protagonist in *Birdsong* therefore represents the upper strata of the libidinal economy and embodies the way in which the boundary between promiscuity and sex work may have been blurred. Like many middle class women involved in the new sex work, she tells us she enjoys both the sex and the material benefits that come from a sexual relationship with rich men. The protagonist as a kept woman suggests she is being sexually satisfied but that sexual satisfaction is also reliant on material comforts, especially the house which her lover provides. These luxuries not only give some degree of independence she also tells us that "there was something about it all that made me think of renewal".

Therefore, Foster's assertion arguably fits the different nature of sex work in which the women in these online short stories operate. While the protagonist in *Birdsong* often seems to have emotional attachments to the man she fondly calls "my lover," the other (poorer) women – who accept that they are indeed prostitutes - often talk about their clients with disgust. So transactional sex is arguably enjoyable for the woman and her client because it comes out of a woman's free will, while the commercial prostitute resents what she does because she is forced into the trade by circumstances.

An investigation into young university women's attitudes to dating married men for material comforts on the website of the Nigerian newspaper Punchng.com and written by Segun

Olugbile et al (2008) provides a real life testament to the attitude of the modern girl to sex work. A student at the University of Ibadan tells the journalists that:

“If a girl has a boyfriend and they have sex regularly and he gives her money, do you call that prostitution? So, what makes ours different? Is it because it is with different men or because we have more guts? Every woman is an ‘ashewo’(prostitute) at one level or the other as long as she is not married.”

Like the young women which the Punch article looked at, the protagonist in *Birdsong* points out that the decision to date a married man is spurred by sexual adventure and the need to maintain an affluent lifestyle and to enhance her career. Her relationships with influential married men are arrangements akin to business transactions and the unwritten mutual agreement is that there will be no commitment. The urban workplace of the twenty-first century is therefore becoming a sexual market space, where people in search of particular types of sexual partners meet and interact.

The protagonist is independent, single-minded and is not bothered by what the society says about women like her. As a matter of fact she tells us her irritation at her female colleagues’ obsession with finding a man to settle down with and loathes the fact that they think that she behaves “like an irresponsible, vaguely foreign teenager: wearing my hair in a natural low-cut, smoking cigarettes right in front of the building, where everyone could see, and refusing to join in the prayer sessions our boss led after Monday meetings.”

The protagonist’s story shows the complexity of the libidinal economy. These young writers are showing us that female sex workers do not entirely rely on playing the victim card and are sometimes not victims of male exploitation, but can be participants and exploiters. For example, Chika Unigwe warns readers not to simply see her fictional characters as merely passive victims, but as women willing to play “the trump card that God has wedged in between their legs in exchange for the material goods they crave, the chance of coming home

rich enough to buy their families cars, apartments and businesses.” (Quoted in Fernanda Eberstadt, 29 April 2011.)

The protagonist in *Birdsong* sees herself as a ‘player’ and an equal partner in this urban game. Her gender indifference points to a belief in gender equity. Her lover puts her up in a bungalow in a very expensive part of Lagos Island, he takes care of her material needs and the relationship brings business to her company, and so she is in the good books of her boss. She knows that her lover’s wife is in America and did not enter the relationship without having made an informed decision. This text, like the blog writings of the Kenyan writer discussed earlier, depicts urban sexual culture in Africa, and suggests that many young African women have a more liberal attitude to sex and morality than their societies.

It is also important to know that her choice is based on quality and not about sleeping with just any man; her lover is not only rich but is a man who is well-educated. She tells us that “He liked birds. Birds had always been just birds to me, but with him I became someone else: I became a person who liked birds...And so we talked eagerly about newspapers and about the newscasts on AIT and CNN, marvelling at how similar our opinions were.” In their book on sexual organisation of the city of Chicago, Edward O. Laumann et al (2004) argue that two factors affect sexual relationships in urban areas – the form and quality of the sex. They point out that economics theory backs up the fact that quality in a sexual relationship is dependent upon the quality of the lovers themselves.

The sexual marketability of the protagonist as well as that of her lover is based on the fact that both are educated and high earners, an emerging factor that is becoming a trend in urban centres all over the world if one agrees with Laumann et al. A woman like the protagonist is able to attract a high-class married man, whom she describes as “courtly, his life lived in well-oiled sequences,” because of her market value and potential. She symbolises quality and exclusivity to married men looking for a no-strings-attached relationships. Her lover also



represents quality as we know that he is a friend to several Nigerian governors, is featured in Sunday magazine pull-outs and has “a glowing ego, like a globe, round and large and in constant need of polishing.” Both characters complement one another and also polish each other’s ego. And these online short stories are showing us that sex work may be moving away from the dirty brothels of the city in Cyprian Ekwensi’s novels into the genteel surroundings of the professional middle classes.

Sue in *Nairobi Nights* suggests that the mobile phone is a regular feature of sex work as it is becoming the medium for conducting sexual affairs and businesses, and with handsets and sim-cards getting cheaper every year, secrecy can be maintained, and old lovers discarded in the same fashion as sim-cards. The protagonist’s lover in *Birdsong* has three mobile phones; one for his wife; one for his political and business contacts, and the last one for his lovers. He conducts all these relationships through these digital gadgets and keeps his texts messages to show off his conquests, be it sexual or business. This is the nature of the kind of sex market that is rarely looked into in postcolonial studies. The mobile phone as a symbol of the digital age empowers lovers, sex workers and mistresses. And in the words of the protagonist’s lover, it allows him to “play” the game better than others. In Nigeria and Kenya, the proliferation of mobile phones like the internet began in the last ten years and they are one of the few gains of democracy in both countries. And these digital tools may also be contributing to a more liberal attitude towards sex and sexuality.

*Birdsong* (2010) like *Ashewos Anonymous* (2009) shows us that modern women do not necessarily lack the moral resources to handle this moral crisis, the tools they use simply do not depend on the moralising of politicians and religious clerics. Moreover, the stories of these protagonists support the journalistic investigation that we see in the article posted on the website of *Punch* newspaper (Nigeria), in which some young educated women rationalise that sleeping with several men simultaneously for money amounts to exposing the hypocrisy

of the society and that they are asserting their independence. Like Sègilola, they see through the hypocrisy of these people. Instead, they rationalise and employ a different moral discourse to justify their involvement with married men. For the protagonist in *Birdsong*, her tactic is not to think about the future, she instead concentrates on enjoying the moment. In *Ashewos Anonymous*, the women use the support group to rationalise and speak “with a candour and openness that would embarrass a market woman”. And as the narrator points out: “it was remarkable to see them helping and encouraging one another, reclaiming the word Ashewo in the process to become a term of endearment.” In the process they justify their sexuality by becoming rhetoricians so as to make their lifestyle plausible to themselves and the society.

This is where we enter the territory of human desire. Jacques Lacan (1990) urges us not just to take words literally; instead he asks us to look at desires. What this chapter has been demonstrating is how desire continues to remain at the very heart of the postcolonial bodies. Sexual desire represents the unfolding condition of the postcolonial state; complex and fractured in so many ways. Desire is contesting with the demand of market forces, and human longings that are affected and impacted upon by material, spiritual and other emotional needs. Joan Copjec (1994) advises that in order to articulate desire, we must “read what is inarticulable in cultural statements” (14). The online short stories in this chapter constitute sites of desire. Their reading gives us an insight into the modern sexual culture and the role that institutional actors and stakeholders (the family, media commentator, politicians, work colleagues, religious organisations etc) play in this culture.

For example, in *Birdsong*, we see that for many of the protagonist’s colleagues, an ideal situation is to find a rich husband like “Ekaete”, who we are told is “lucky, just six months and she is already engaged”. The longing to find a husband and settle down emanates from the image created and reinforced by both colonial modernity and the postcolonial capitalist

state. But the libidinal economy creates a (erotic) desire for material goods, which may conflict with the message of morality. In addition, the libidinal economy constructs the individual as either a fearing or desiring person, and examples of this show how we have wants and desires which we fulfil mostly through purchasing goods and services.

African literature in the online space is perhaps suggesting that many young women want to live up to societal moral codes but the desire for good life, which the society also endorses outweigh the demand of sexual ethic. In Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2011), the university-educated Sisi, one of the African sex workers in Antwerp rationalises that now that she has made enough money from prostitution to live a comfortable life, "the world was exactly as it should be. No more and definitely no less." She has used the proceeds of prostitution to meet societal expectations. And although the hypocritical society demands sexual morality from women, the money she has made "would buy her forgetfulness" from the society.

Certain aspects of sexual relationships, romance and marriage in this digital age, and in fact in the urban postcolonial landscape, can be seen in terms of economics. Modern girls of course, want romantic love, but that of course does not preclude the desire for eligible men. So, we can see the link between moral demands in relation to the sexuality. In Unigwe's *Anonymous* (2006), the university-educated protagonist chooses to sell her body for sex in Europe rather than wait for true love in Nigeria. Even before she goes to Belgium, she gives more attention to financially capable suitors. She tells us about one of these men who had just arrived in Nigeria on holiday from the United States: "Then we began to see each other every day, prying into each other's lives. He told me of his home in Atlanta with its four bedrooms and a garden. He told me of his wide plasma TV, bigger than any I had ever seen at Mega Plaza. 'It covers the wall of my TV room, man!' His stories fed my hunger for a better life away from the dust of Lagos."

These female characters do not hide the fact that they are ready to use their bodies as a means of securing their financial needs and from these stories we can deduce that for many educated young African women looking to move up the social ladder, the cost and benefits of settling down must be weighed against the opportunity cost of emotional investment and the longevity of a relationship. Eligible men (that is rich men) are highly desirable, they are in short supply and they symbolise financial security for these young women.

From these fictional stories, in addition to the real life accounts that we find in journalism, we see how some young women working within the new sex work negotiate around the restrictions imposed on them by the institution of marriage, which supports different rules for the selection of partner and the reality of sustenance in the twentieth century. Unigwe and Adichie have consistently argued that their stories reflect the life of real life urban African women; both the protagonists in Adichie and Unigwe's online fictions are university educated but these online short stories suggest that without the right connections, their education may not be enough to move them up the career ladder. So prostitution within the new sex work becomes a way of gaining career advancement for some young women.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has examined the theme of technological production of classed and sexualised bodies in new African writing in cyberspace by some of the emerging young writers from Nigeria and Kenya, as well as writing from a few of their African contemporaries. I also compared some of these new works with the literature that came out of the book age. In choosing these aspects of new online writing, I asked tentative and contingent questions. I scrutinized hundreds of emails; I examined hundreds of short stories, poems and essays that have been published online. I also read hundreds of Facebook posts and Twitter tweets, as well as material published in print form. The thesis depicts how several young writers in the digital age are speculating on the conditions of being Nigerians, of being Kenyans, of being Africans, and of being creative artists in a digitally globalised twenty-first century. I started by emphasising that we should see the African artist not just as a producer of aesthetics but also as a recorder of history and as a reporter of events. Furthermore, I investigated this fiction and poetry as writing by people who are often seen as Africa's new cultural ambassadors. My analysis suggests that these are tasks that writers such as Binyavanga Wainaina, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Olu Oguibe, Muthoni Garland, Tolu Ogunlesi, Shailja Patel and Muholi Zanele take seriously. Suffice to say this online literature is addressed to fellow Africans as well as to the lucrative western market. So we see that the focus of literature is not only on writing back to the metropolitan centre of the West, but also as Africa writing back to itself.

Karin Barber (2007) shows us the way in which technology has continuously encouraged the birth of new textual genres in Africa. For example, the literature that came out of the last century mediated between African and European traditions, spawning new models of fiction, poetry and theatre. We conclude that the internet continues this tradition of sharing African

stories by using technological tools that came from the outside. And in the process, technology is allowing writers to respond in real-time to a changing society and to the outside world.

In exploring new writing coming out of cyberspace, we see how this space is enabling class representations in literature as the African cyberspace is currently dominated by middle class Africans. I argue that because of this current trend, much of the literary texts being produced by mostly middle class writers target middle class readers. Class consciousness is not new to African literature as many pre-colonial texts strongly reflect class structure and aspiration. However, this thesis has tried to fill the void that occurred because of an under-theorization in postcolonial studies in African contexts, of the examination of class and social formations. While there is no shortage of studies on class analysis in the western world, literary analyses on class formation in the postcolonial world of Africa, are few and far between. Using fiction, poetry and some of the emerging voices' personal stories posted in the digital space, I showed why it is important for literary studies to look at the question of class as it cannot be divorced from modern Nigerian, Kenyan and African identities, which are being shaped and transformed by both globalizing and localizing tendencies.

In addition, we can conclude that class consciousness in new writing is connected to the way in which literature is now representing contemporary sexual politics. I showed that many young writers are taking a different path from some leading members of previous generations, when it comes to literature's representation of marginal sexual figures. I linked class and sexual politics in these new fictional narratives and poetry to the freedom that the digital space allows young writers as this space is largely uncensored in most African countries. Additionally, it is cheaper and easier to publish online without having to conform to the politics of book publishing. This possibility of freedom is being enhanced further by the anonymity of the internet, whereby writers can write under pseudonyms and aliases and

readers can comment on texts in the same way. What is posted online can be deleted or added to at any time and simultaneously from several places and through various digital mediums. Texts, images and identity in the digital space are in a state of flux; they are malleable and fluid.

The two chapters on class and African literature in cyberspace showed writers using literature and non-fictional narratives to comment on the aforementioned conditions. These chapters also depict how new technologies intersect with the dynamics and imaginaries of globalisation, class and Africa.

In chapter one, I showed the way in which some emerging voices are using poetry to affirm their identity and literary heritage, by reprising the role of orature in pre-colonial era through the use of new media technology. Unlike in the pre-colonial era, texts can now be stored and transmitted through different digital mediums. And texts are not merely spoken and written words, but they encompass audio-visual elements and are more immediate and interactive. In addition, with millions of Africans now online and with several millions more on mobile phones, I examined how African literature in cyberspace is capitalising on this embrace of digital technologies. I argued that the literature that is coming out of the digital space suggests that some young writers want to ensure a closer interaction between writers and readers of literature in a way that may have been impossible in the book age. Through literature, African cyberspace has become a site where all kinds of discussion and interaction between readers and writers can take place. Poetry and fiction in the online space becomes a gathering point for the digital community to discuss shared history and contemporary experience. But unlike the community of old, the emerging community is virtual; writers, photographers, new media technologists and readers alike all gather on the internet ‘cloud’ through various digital mediums and these individuals are based in different locations from

across the globe. People can log onto cyberspace at different times to access and contribute to the same texts, and texts are susceptible to changes (small or large scale) and so these gatherings therefore complicate ideas of 'space/place' (here) as well as 'space/exploration' (out there). Furthermore, African literature in cyberspace becomes a collaborative project between writers, technologists and readers. And this collaborative model of aesthetic production grounded in technological innovation and disseminated virtually engages on-going transformations in practices and definitions of African-ness. I analysed this collaboration as impacting on the nature of the African text.

While the Pan-Africanist W.E.B Du Bois famously said that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line," W.J.T Mitchell (1994: 2) argued that "the problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the image." Several African writers and artists see Africa at the core of the image discourse. In chapter two, we hear Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie lamenting the danger of the single story" when it comes to Africa. She uses the example of a real person - an Ivy-League professor who refused to believe some of her middle class fictional characters - as an embodiment of the way in which many outside of Africa see the continent as a place where everybody is poor and how literature should perpetuate this stereotype. Wainaina's (2002) famous online essay for *Granta*, *How to Write About Africa*, likewise attacks this stereotypical image of Africa; "Taboo subjects: ordinary domestic scenes, love between Africans (unless a death is involved), references to African writers or intellectuals, mention of school-going children who are not suffering from yaws or Ebola fever or female genital mutilation." (<http://www.granta.com/Magazine/92/How-to-Write-about-Africa/Page-1>)



For several of these new writers, the single story about Africa is a legacy of a Conradian worldview about a 'dark continent' that is filled with abject poverty and want, and while the internet has provided an opportunity to spread the many facets of Africa in the twenty-first century beyond the familiar stereotypes, the image of Africa (in these writers' view) is nonetheless similar to many verbal and photographic descriptions provided by earlier novelists, journalists and anthropologists. As Macharia and Mwangi (2011) argue: "The image of Africa seems locked in time, occupying what Johannes Fabian terms 'all chronic' time. Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (2002) is a critique of the ideas that anthropologists are "here and now," their objects of study are "there and then," and that the "other" exists in a time not contemporary with that of the West.

Stefano Gualeni (2011) argues that "interactive digital technology can grant access to experiences and even systems of perception that were inaccessible to humans prior to the advent of computers." Gualeni's argument is probably germane; on Facebook, Twitter, blog posts, internet chat-rooms and listservs, writers regularly use fiction and real-life experience to debunk many of the negative stereotypes of Africa and Africans that they have encountered in literature and in the media. Social networking platforms provide the capability to rebut stereotypes and to provide evidence of Africa's multi-faceted stories as a counter to the single story. I have pointed out that online short stories and poetry as well as writers' social network status updates are part of these cultural mechanisms. As Wainaina posits on a Facebook post on November 19, 2011, young Africans are not interested "in Oxfam, we are not interested in Tony Blair, we are not interested in what Oxfam is doing for Africa, we are not interested in what aid donors are doing, we are not interested in the partnership those people have with global media to be the voice of Africa to the world. We never have been. We don't talk about it, we don't discuss it." By using literature in the online space in addition to recounting personal stories to narrate the contemporary African experience and the

existence of social classes - not too dissimilar from that of the outside world - I argued that some of these young writers justifiably seek to lay claim to Africa's humanity and to their status as members of the world's literary elite. Literature is thus a cultural tool that is being used to respond to the outside world's interpretation of Africa in a new media age.

Fredric Jameson (1991) links digitization to globalisation and to what he sees as the agenda of "late capitalism." For Jameson, cultural productions through technology by many who considered themselves radical have been usurped by capitalism. While it focuses on the freedom that the digital space provides young African writers, this thesis also recognises that the online African space is being produced by the global flux of capitalism, in which the unconnected are in danger of being overlooked and misrepresented because some members of this new generation are becoming pre-occupied with using literature to present the African middle classes to the outside world, that is often too willing to believe what Adichie sees as "the single story" about Africa.

As Chapter Two demonstrated, there is a danger in African digital literature's obsession with telling the middle class African story, because some of the fictional narratives can be read as pathologizing people who are not educated and who in the process are not part of Africa's cyber-community. We can infer that some of the online short stories that I have examined suggest that some writers are failing to recognise their own investment in a 'single-story' of a middle-class which, in looking to a western model, distances itself from poorer people within the same country and continent. While some young writers may want to lambaste the negative stereotyping of Africans by a section of the media in Europe and North America, their creative desire for a globalized lifestyle based on western practices indicates a tension with their opposition to the western attitude towards Africa. Their interpretations of love and

sexuality are embedded in the structure laid down by the globalized capitalist system and western rhetoric. The exclusivity of the internet means that the traditional African view in matters such as love and romance is being obscured and voices of millions of economically-disadvantaged lovers are not heard because of this fixation with using the internet to tell the middle class African story. So what we sometimes get in online texts are versions of the middle class bourgeois lifestyle romance not too dissimilar from that of global capitalism. In the process, African literature essentialized the body; the body of the middle class African is glorified while that of the poor African is portrayed as discursively, materially and ideologically abject.

Adrienne Rich's (1980) assertion that the body is political rings true when it comes to African literature. Writers and artists alike have continuously used literature and the creative arts to inscribe the society's point of view and their own personal agenda on the African body. In the last five chapters, I examined the way in which the marginalised bodies of the homosexual and that of the libidinal woman have been inscribed upon by writers, by the society and by the machine (both print and new media). The human body in literature can arguably be read as a machine and the machine can also be read as performing the role of the human body. As Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1983) have pointed out, bodies humanize the machine and the machine in turn incorporates humanity. With regard to techno-bodies, I constructed a rough historical map of how African literature has responded to the politics surrounding non-straight bodies and to women who do not conform to the society's sexual expectations. I grounded my analysis on a Foucauldian worldview that sees sexual politics as a politics of societal control.

From the short stories, poems, photographs and essays that are being posted in cyberspace, we can conclude that some of the emerging voices are using literature in the online space as a way of taking a somewhat provocative stance on taboo subjects, especially with regard to issues like homosexuality and prostitution. Reasons for this rather audacious development include the fact that some of these writers see the online writing space as representing “critical and tonal shifts” that allow them to “intervene into the politics and poetics of what Lauren Berlant terms ‘stuckness’ to posit new and alternative social imaginaries, rich spaces and resources ... to inhabit and re-think our collective social and political lives and practices.” (Keguro Macharia and Wambui Mwangi, 2011). In addition, African literature in cyberspace has the potential to bypass the state and the religious class. In chapters three, five, six and seven, we see that literature in cyberspace is providing a voice for repressed identities in all their simple and complicated forms. This is because social media and weblogs are becoming ‘real’ spaces to discuss matters deemed too provocative and unsavoury in ordinary and real public spaces.

In Chapter Three, I show that African literature in the digital space presents literary study with an opportunity to analyse sexual politics and the representations of those bodies enmeshed within it. I argued that a close reading of some of the online fiction and poetry reveals not just a literary recognition of the debt that the internet generation owes the first generation of modern African writers, but the way in which the ‘no gay in Africa’ debate has shifted to a more confrontational representation by writers because of the digital space. Furthermore, I constructed a historical footprint, from the print to the digital age, of how modern African literature has looked at queer bodies through the lens of decolonization, the politics of the postcolonial state in the twenty-first century, and through black queer figures who are criss-crossing the African Diaspora. I have argued that while the older generations of

writers may have not personally vocalised support for the recognition of these bodies and while they may not have fought for gay rights on the continent, their creative writings have aptly captured the story of these marginalised bodies. An analysis of texts published in print and in cyberspace can provide us with the starting point that one hundred per cent non-straight Africans are arguably central to our understanding of African politics, because as a response to that politics, literature has to continuously look at shifting sexual meanings and erotic choices. My argument is that what has changed in a new media age, however, is a growing vocalisation of support for gay rights, within and outside of literature by some emerging voices.

However, chapters three and five showed us that while the near ubiquity of mobile phones and internet cafes in urban Africa means that acquiring and publishing online information has never been easier, increased access to consuming and producing digital information raises new challenges for those fictional characters who use the internet for sexual experimentation. These cyber subjects (cyborgs) can also be read as representing the real life experiences of online Africans. In these chapters, we see that online fictional characters can reveal to us how the digital space can also pose a danger to those who do not conform to societal norms. In Chapters Three and Four for example, Shailja Patel's online drama, *Last Word: Caught in the Act*, in addition to the short stories of Crispin Oduobuk-Mfon Abasi and that of Eusebius McKaiser, illustrate the danger that the internet poses for gays and lesbians in Africa, especially when they use the internet to partake in cyber-activities. Such creative writing can be read as 'coming out' fictional narratives made possible by the digital space. It also represents the dangers of rape facing queer characters within the online and offline space.

The online fiction and poetry I looked at suggest that some emerging voices want to bring

these shadowy figures to our attention. These writers, while not ignoring the international queer connectedness in cyberspace, are embracing the local uniqueness of same-sex desire in their creative writings. The digital is thus helping to enable the outing of a submerged African personhood. In addition, these new works are subversive and are unearthing previously unseen patterns of sexual violence, while at the same time debunking some of the myths surrounding the queer African's body. They also problematize African sexual history in so many ways; so much so that the queer person may after all not be a by-product of colonialism and neo-colonialism, but authentically African, with a strong connection to the continent's unfolding history.

This new digital fiction and poetry indicates that literary studies need to pay attention to the ways in which some young Africans are using the internet to mobilize and give voices to gays, lesbians and libidinal women, people that contemporary history may have ignored. However, these stories reveal that there is currently an under-representation of poor and working class queer characters in much of the literature that is being published online. Gay and lesbian characters are very often portrayed as well-to-do urbanites with disposable income and who are able to move seamlessly between African and non-African spaces. The lifestyle of most of these fictional characters is not too different from that of trans-national middle class and highly educated writers of the new media age.

Through some of these online creative works, we see a continuation of the contemporary tradition, where online literature becomes a tool for reporting on intimacy and for cementing in the reader's mind those stories that have become the fabric of contemporary life. And so, while this thesis depicts how online African literature - although an agent of global capitalism - is also now rebelling against the heteronormative agenda of the offline space, it also shows

the need for literary studies to analyse the way in which on the other hand, some of these texts can mimic and even support the existing decorum on intimacy.

The difference in attitude, the tension and perhaps disjunction, that this thesis has discussed in some of the cybertexts I have looked at, arguably speak to the complexity of Africa; of the continent's many stories and the different ways in which each individual conceptualises the society. After all, Adichie did warn us against the danger of the single African story. Africa is a complex continent and the internet reflects that complexity by allowing a cacophony of literary voices to speak. So we can deduce that young writers do not necessarily look at intimacy from the same angle. It is very easy to romanticize every young African writer posting creative writings on Facebook Notes and 'musing' on African sexuality in the digital space, as dreamy-eyed radical when it comes to the issues of sex and romance. The reality is that the internet, of course, can also be a tool for contemporary conservatism. It is also important to note that despite the freedom that the internet permits young Kenyan and Nigerian writers, some aspects of literature in the digital space dealing with modern African women shows us that sexual deviancy (and freedom) is still being overpowered (perhaps unconsciously) by the agenda of colonial modernity.

The last three chapters of this thesis looked at online African literature's depiction of the libidinal market. This is in keeping with the reporting role of the African artist on the relationship between the body that inscribes on other bodies, the body that works and the body that desires. The short stories I looked at reflect on the way in which new and old writing represent the relationship between the erotic, the production system, the consumption system and social identity. What African literature in the online space is showing us is that capitalism, as an offshoot of modernity, creates the libidinal economy, of which the prostitute is a central figure. From some of the earlier work of modern African literature, we see the

figure of the prostitute as embodying the anomalous, which does not fit into the cultural order. But for some young writers writing in the new media age, the prostitute is not an anomaly, instead she represents our repressed desire, and this desire needs to come out in the open so as to counter the heteronormative agenda of capitalism (both global and local).

While some members of the older generation of writers see prostitution as a problem created by colonial modernity, some new voices are using literature to reflect on the complexities of the libidinal. The fiction and poetry that this thesis has looked at suggest that what was previously considered humanly productive was the male - and only the male of a particular human society. Now we are recognising that through the trope of the prostitute, African women are economically productive and that they have a sexual culture. Several of these online creative writings suggest that prostitution objectifies African women, but at the same time due to the need to survive in a capitalist postcolonial Africa, many young women see sex work as perhaps the quickest way out of poverty and of gaining a foothold in a male-dominated African society. So, the libidinal economy that demeans women, also ironically, becomes a tool of financial security and of empowerment. These writings also show how the internet allows the true nature of the sex market to be represented and how some young writers are becoming advocates for sex workers who are often marginalised, and in the process online African literature becomes a potential agent for change.

Because of social media and blogging technology and because of its immediacy and robustness, the digital space now allows African literature to represent Africa and Africans through fictional characters in a way that may have been impossible in novels and print magazines. But like the new media, online literature is still relatively new, so further research is needed into how African literature in cyberspace as well as online African readers and the outside world relate to one other.



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